

Long Hard Times to Come

by Jaeger Gipsy Danger

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Summary: Did you know Sarah Palmer was there on Circinius IV when the Covenant attacked? You didn't? The story is my version of MC, Palmer, Kelly, Orenski, Lasky and Sullivan's relationship when they first meet at Corbulo Academy, until the day they recognize each other from the past on board The UNSC Infinity after Cortana's tragic sacrifice. Loosely based on canon.

## 1. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 1

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 1, On This Lonely Road

AN: \*\*PLEASE READ: \*\*This story takes place over several years. Beginning with Palmer, Lasky, Sullivan and Orenski's rescue by Master Chief from Corbulo Academy. So that's why in Chapter 9, MC is acting like a teenager, because he is still a teenager and Chapter 11, Palmer is still an ODS. You'll know when we reach present day.

Thanks for stopping by.

Many thanks and Spartan Smiles to my stable of roguishly handsome and devilishly brilliant betas: "mcknight93" "Andrithir," "Insaneblain" and "A-01" Go read their stuff, too!

\* \* \*

><p>"On this lonely road, trying to make it home<p>

Doing it by my lonesome - pissed off, who wants some

I'm fighting for my soul, God get at your boy

You try to Bogartâ€"fall back, I go hard

~0~

On this lonely road, trying to make it home

Doing it by my lonesomeâ€"pissed off, who wants some

I see them long hard times to come."

The Theme for the TV Show, \_Justified.\_ Performed by Gangstagrass

\* \* \*

><p>Oh-five-hundred on a cloudy Monday morning, fifty trainees stood silently in the driving rain. At attention for the last two hours, the trainees endured the 110-degree heat and 100% humidity with stoic intensity. They could no longer feel the difference between the sweat on their skin or the rain soaking their utility uniforms; easy duty compared to the formal training.<p>

Once quartered on Reach, the UNSC's ODST School had relocated after the planet's destruction by Covenant troops. The UNSC had understandably taken its time finding another planet with equally harsh weather and even harsher terrain. While these might be mandatory conditions for UNSC Special Operations training, the older soldiers made a habit of reassuring the younger students just how easy they had it now. Back in the day, they claimed Reach trained soldiers into real Hell Jumpers. The way they told it Reach could kill a man if he stood in one place for too long. The students disagreed.

Between the icy lake water, which hovered most of the year at 50 degrees, the rocky and steep terrain, fluctuating humidity and nasty vampire-like insects that could suck you dry, they get plenty of misery, thank you very much.

They also had other things on their minds that helped take the edge off. Today marked the end of their formal training and many of them had failed to reach their potential. By the end of the duty day, at least half of these volunteers would head home, washed out of the most intense training program in the UNSC. There was no shame in this failure, no black mark on their record. Not everyone could withstand the rigors of ODST Training. It was crucial that you tried. And what if you made it to the end and still washed out? At least you still had good stories to tell at the Officer's Club on Saturday night.

The lone female of the group, a diminutive Marine with long sable colored hair - which she stubbornly refused to cut - and matching brown eyes, wasn't worried about washing out. She was the best shot and the best tactician. What she lacked in actual physical strength, compared to the men, she made up for in courage, bravado, and intelligence.

At this moment, she was thinking back to a night four years ago. The rain and humidity ceased to register on her senses as she sifted through the memories. Powerfully built, impossibly tall, and obviously brave, the mysterious Spartan she met that night had not been far from her thoughts since those hours at Corbulo Academy.

The training officer interrupted her musings by shouting into her face.

"Lieutenant Palmer! Would you care to join us?"

That he'd sneaked up on her only added to the embarrassment of catching her daydreaming. She yanked her attention back to the present.

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!"

"Did I ask for an apology?"

"No, sir!"

"Is there somewhere else you'd rather be? Home with Mommy and Daddy?"

He was standing so close to her now, she could feel the light spray of his spital on her face. She didn't dare turn her head away.

"No, sir!"

"Maybe you're daydreaming about one of your fellow trainees. They are a good looking bunch, aren't they Palmer? Each one of them has five buddies who'd give their right nut to be ODST. Maybe it's time you moved aside for one of them. What do you think little Sarah, you think you got what it takes to be a Hell Jumper?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Know what, little Sarah? Maybe when you grow up you can be a Spartan?"

That got a chuckle from the other trainees. He continued as he had all along with his attempt to break her. She continued to hold her ground, and it infuriated him. Then Sarah Palmer lifted her eyes to the training officer's face.

"Maybe I'll do that, sir."

His eyes bulged out of their sockets slightly. The spray turned into drops.

"For smart mouthing your training officer you can lead these magnificent specimens of manhood over the obstacle course. Don't let them beat you to the finish line or you'll have to start again. GET THAT CUTE MARINE ASS OF YOURS THE HELL OUT OF MY SIGHT. MOVE!"

Ignoring the moaning and groaning of her classmates behind her. Twenty-year-old Sarah Palmer headed for the first obstacle. So angry with herself for daydreaming and worse at being caught, she cursed in frustration as she sprinted to the first obstacle.

Childish is what it was. Try as she might she could not forget the man she met that night. She'd spent just a few hours with one of those Spartans. At the time, she hadn't known what he was. Four years later, she still caught herself watching for that tall man whenever

she noticed a group of Spartans. It was a chance encounter, nothing more. They'd saved each other's lives that night. In fact, if it hadn't been for him, she'd have been just another cadet swept into the bloodbath of the invasion.

After watching her fellow cadets die at the hands of those Covenant troops, she'd vowed to kill every single alien soldier who crossed her path or appeared in the cross hairs of her scope. Just to make sure no-one escaped her notice, she chose to sharp shooter as her specialty. She set goals for herself, based on what she'd witnessed that horrific night. She intended to become nothing less than the best of the best.

It was that night and the Spartan's actions, which drove her to perfect her skills, become the perfect Marine, and expert sniper. In just a few hours, she would graduate, third in her class, an ODST; a Hell Jumper.

She bounded over the wall and swung from a rope across the filthy water. Behind her, she heard one of her classmates swear when his hands slipped off the slimy rope. Palmer chuckled and doubled her speed to the next obstacle. She hit the lower rung and began to climb the wood frame structure.

Although she had tried to help the other cadets that gruesome night; their youth and lack of experience proved inadequate to the task of holding off a full-fledged alien attack. What they hadn't known was the entire planet was under attack and falling quickly into the hands of those alien soldiers. Knowledge that hadn't stopped the guilt over her inability to save at least one cadet. The memories came back again as she ran to the next obstacle.

Running through that blood soaked night, Cadet Palmer dove for cover behind a boxwood hedge, dodging a spray of Needler fire. The purple shards impacted a wall above her head and sent down chunks of concrete.

She bit down on the groan of pain when the concrete ripped open her shirt and tore open her flesh. When she could open her eyes, it was to the sight of the once beautiful courtyard of Corbulo Academy. The cruel sounds of screaming and the sight of mutilated bodies buffeted her shredded senses. The central fountain ran red with the blood of her classmates. The neat lawn and pristine sidewalks were equally gruesome; streaked with gore. The statue of the famous Roman general had been reduced to a smoking pile of slag. The buildings burned with the eerie light of plasma fires. There were just too many of them. Outflanked and outgunned, the school was not prepared to meet such a threat.

As Cadet Palmer backed into cover, searching for survivors and picking up discarded weapons as she went, she found herself retreating into the woods. She wished at least one more person had made it out with her. Instead, she was alone inside the silent columns of trees. A fog made up of smoke from the fires rises around her. The effect renders the area ghostly and the silence is suddenly much worse than the screams. She cannot be the only one who made it out alive. She can't be... Freshman Cadet Sarah Palmer was sixteen years old.

Lights in the distance! She ran for them the moment that her brain

registered what they were. About a mile from the campus, she tripped over a tree branch and fell headlong, her ankle gave under the pressure of a tree limb.

Her fall prevented the Hunter, who stood silently listening to her approach from accurately locating her position. Palmer saw him, though, and nearly screamed in surprise. What were these creatures, she wondered, wiping the worst of the mud from her face. What had provoked the attack? She wished again that an instructor or even an upperclassman might find her. They needed to form up, prepare a defensive posture.

In a flash of the headlights of a vehicle, she saw other cadets, her sharp eyes identifying them as upperclassmen.

One of the young men was running. While she tried to make sense of what she was seeing, someone else, moved across her field of vision. Very tall and completely encased in armor the man catapulted himself onto the shoulder of the giant alien. The sight stopped her in her tracks. How could any human move like that? She watched him reach for something on his belt. She could see for herself that there was nothing there. He began to reach for his combat knife when she called out.

"Soldier! Here!" Cadet Palmer tossed two frag grenades up to the armored man. He nodded his thanks and shouted down to her.

"Run for the Pelican, Cadet. Two clicks due east. Go!"

A freshman cadet is accustomed to following orders. She did as she'd been ordered and headed down the road, leaving the Warthog and the people behind. The grenades exploded, sending orange goo fifty feet in all directions. The concussion travelled even further and knocked her to the ground. She heard the Hunter roar as it died. Had the tall armored man survived? Dragging herself to her feet, Sarah Palmer limped through the forest, moving toward the direction of the Pelican. To distract herself from the pain, she wondered who that giant man could be while she marveled at how he had so bravely jumped onto the thing to kill it. That was the bravest action she had ever seen. Who was he?

Footsteps to her left. She whirled. Small chattering creatures charged toward her. The magnum pistols in her hands were nearly spent. The first bullet landed between the eyes of the first Grunt. The last bullet cleaved a hole through the second one's head. One of the creatures was trying to flank her. She swung her arm with all her strength and smashed his head in with the butt of the magnum in her right hand. Thick purple blood washed over her hand, staining the hand grip. Adrenaline surged through her already geared up posture; she was ready to take every one of them down.

The remaining two continued their chattering charge toward her. She didn't notice the grenades in their hands until they were almost on her. She turned to run only to find her feet leave the ground as someone lifted her with an arm around her waist. Her peripheral vision watched an assault rifle as long as her leg let fly a string of bullets ripping the creatures apart. Then he turned toward her to shield her from the grenade blast.

It was the armored man! She held onto the chest plates of his armor

with both hands.

"Cadet!" Then, with a quieter voice he continued while looking down into her anguished face. "We must move. They are waiting for us at the LZ."

She wasn't afraid; not exactly. Hiding her face against his armor and hanging on to the chest plate, she felt safe for the first time since this nightmare began.

"Cadet, pull yourself together."

In a moment that was so brief it was more the promise of touch than the real thing he pulled her hands away and set her down on her feet.

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I'm fine."

\_"Chief! The warthog showed up without you. Where are you?"\_

"On my way, Kelly. Picked up a straggler."

He was gratified to watch her pride flare. Straightening her shoulders, she squared off in front of him. She tried to stare into his visor, with her brown eyes blazing with anger and determination. With a flick of her hands, she bunched up her long hair and tied it into a knot at the back of her head and retrieved the spent magnums.

He hadn't worried that she was afraid. Someone who was panicking wouldn't have the presence of mind to toss him those two grenades. Along with calmly killing those three Grunts, whether she realized it or not, she'd probably saved his life.

"A straggler? I'm a freshman cadet at Corbulo Military Academy."

He acknowledged her claim with a curt nod. "Show me what you've learned, Cadet. Get us to the evac zone." He motioned with his hand, inviting her to move out and indicating that she takes point in the now clear path to their waiting escape from the planet.

\* \* \*

<p>watch?v=yT2i2UylxJ0<p>

On this lonely road, trying to make it home

Doing it by my lonesome-pissed off, who wants some

I'm fighting for my soul, God get at your boy

You try to Bogart-fall back, I go hard

On this lonely road, trying to make it home

Doing it by my lonesome-pissed off, who wants some

I see them long hard times to come

Verse 1:

My life is ill son... prepared to kill son  
A paradox of pain, baby; it's real son  
Lonely traveler, ain't trying to battle ya  
But if you're feeling tuff dog, I welcome all challengers  
Ain't got no family, you see there's one of me  
Might lose your pulse standing two feet in front of me  
I'm pissed at the world, but I ain't looking for trouble  
I might crack a grin, I aint looking to hug you  
Think about it, nobody wants to die  
There's rules to this game son, I'm justified  
I'm ready to go partner, hey I'm on the run  
The devils hugging on my boots that's why I own a gun  
This journey's too long, I'm looking for some answers  
So much time stressing, I forget the questions  
I fear no man, you don't want no problems 'B'  
Eyes in the back of my head, you better not follow me

[Chorus]

On this lonely road, trying to make it home  
Doing it by my lonesome-pissed off who wants some  
I'm fighting for my soul, God get at your boy  
You try to Bogart-fall back, I go hard  
On this lonely road, trying to make it home  
Doing it by my lonesome-pissed off, who wants some  
I see them long hard times to come

Verse 2:

You probably think I'm crazy, or got some loose screws  
But that's alright though-I'm a'do me, you do you  
So how you judging me? I'm just trying to survive  
And if the time comes, I aint trying to die  
I'm just trying to fly, and get a little love

Find me a dime piece and get a little hug

Hook the car up-hit the bar up-clean the scars up-hey yo, the stars  
up

Hey this is the life of an outlaw

We aint promised tomorrow-I'm living now, dog

I'm walking through life. but yo my feet hurt

All my blessings are fed, man I'll rest when I'm dead

Look through my eyes and see the real world

Take a walk with me, have a talk with me

Where we end up-god only knows

Strap your boots on tight you might be alright

[Chorus]

On this lonely road, trying to make it home

Doing it by my lonesome pissed off who wants some

I'm fighting for my soul, God get at your boy

You try to Bogart fall back I go hard

On this lonely road, trying to make it home

Doing it by my lonesome pissed off who wants some

I see them long hard times to come

## 2. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 2

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 2, No Matter What

\* \* \*

><p>"No matter what they call us<p>

However they attack

No matter where they take us

We'll find our own way back"

â€"Andrew Lloyd Webber, No Matter What from \_Whistle Down the  
Wind\_

\* \* \*



><p>The Pelican dropships rushed back to the <em>Pillar of Autumn</em> in silence. No one dared say it aloud. Even the usual radio chatter is ominously absent. Humanity is under attack by alien invaders. Harvest went first, attacked and destroyed without warning. On that shocking day, the military added 'glassed' to their vocabulary. After destroying everyone and everything, the alien monsters reached down from space and boiled the planet's surface.

After Harvest, Reach fell, and today, Circinius IV. The senior leaders who knew their history, whispered the old German word Blitzkrieg amongst themselves. These invaders and their methods generated terror wherever they went.

To the troops on the ground, it was an immediate and real horror. With no way to defend the civilians and nowhere to run, victory was not even a goal. In the beginning, earth officials and the UNSC had tried to hide the number of casualties. It hadn't taken long for the images to leak out over the networks. The Insurrectionists took second place on the news feeds these days.

Yet, many people, especially the politicians who deftly reassured their constituents, felt what happened on Harvest was a one-time incident. Alien raiders, nothing more, they explained, looking for loot. They presented neither a problem, nor a threat. Those monsters were subdued and vanquished through the superior firepower of the UNSC. Nothing to worry about, they said, under the protection of the military presence of the UNSC, humanity is safe.

Once the surviving ODST, Marines, and soldiers were safely aboard, 'Pillar' and their injuries tended a ritual began. The soldiers repeated a ritual and tradition, which is thousands of years old. They knew in just a few hours, they will go back to the planet. It's their job, there are resources to save and survivors to locate. To keep up their spirits, they joked, they teased, and they boasted about their exploits. They told each other stories about what they saw down there. They argued about who had the most kills and who slacked off "the standard soldier bravado that carried them through.

Those who could get some food down, ate and some grabbed rack time. Most didn't seek sleep, for they knew that's where the nightmares lived. If this were their time to die, they would do it with their eyes open and take at least one of those bastards with them. A civilian who overheard their conversation would flee in revulsion and disbelief at the gallows humor. If asked, the soldiers might shrug and reply that civilians never understood about war anyway.

Three of the surviving Corbulo Academy cadets sat huddled together under a blanket, wide-eyed and mindlessly sipping hot coffee to avert their recent shock.

"Where do you think they'll take us?" Normally strong and unafraid, April Orenski's shaky, tearful tone spoke of all their fears.

Cadet Sullivan shared her question, but didn't dare open his mouth. If he did, he thought that he might start crying and never be able to stop. Thomas Lasky was close to shock as he tried to assimilate the last six hours and all they had seen and heard. Then he remembered that tall man, the one with 117 on his armor. He'd been carrying a

young woman in his arms as he followed them aboard. Another survivor? Yes, his shell-shocked mind answered, it was another cadet. He wondered if she were okay. They should stick together. After squeezing April's hand, he shared a look with Sully and went in search of their classmate.

The two Spartans, Kelly-087, and John-117 didn't speak while Kelly tended the young cadet's injuries. Neither was ready to discuss what they witnessed tonight on Circinius IV or the reality it brought to their immediate world.

As the Pelicans broke the atmosphere and fled into space, Master Chief watched Circinius IV burn from an aft view screen. A groan from the bed turned his attention to the small bio bed.

While John watched Kelly efficiently clean off the dirt and dress the cadet's wounds, he began to notice other things about the cadet. For a young woman to be accepted into Corbulo Academy, required exemplary academic scores and superior physical abilities. That was a sharp contrast to the vulnerable, even fragile, looking woman lying there. With her long hair, porcelain skin, and dark brown eyes, she was pretty in a way that made you feel she needed protection. She was an odd contrast from the young woman on the bed to the future solider.

Pretty? Now where had that come from? John mentally shook himself. Looking down into her pale face, he wondered if she would recover from the trauma and the injuries. He had to ask.

"Bad?"

Kelly sat back on her heels, "Once I got her cleaned up I found a fractured hand and ankle. There's a gash, which required stitches, on her forehead. She may have fallen while she ran through the woods. I cleaned out a deep contusion on her back."

"She broke her hand hitting a Grunt hard enough to kill it. Showed no sign of broken bonesâ€¦ Or fear."

Kelly nodded, "She's obviously tough."

"Tough as you, Rabbit." The Spartan commented affectionately using Kelly's nickname. "I watched her. She was ready to take on a whole army."

Kelly climbed to her feet. "I'm going to check on the other three cadets. See if you can get those weapons out of her hands? She's got a damn death grip on 'em."

Kelly stood up and headed toward the front of the aircraft, then stopped and turned. With the helmet off, her youth showed on her face and in the depth of unrestrained emotion in her yearning blue eyes.

"John?"

Her voice, which held a tone he'd never heard from her brought him from the bio bed to her side in two strides.

"Are you injured?"

She shook her head, "No," then for extra bravado she certainly didn't feel added, "I'm fine."

"Kelly?" He placed his hands on her shoulders to keep her from leaving.

"I'm fine. I'll go see to those cadets now," she said and removing her hands from his too quickly for good manners, hurried away.

As he watched her leave, he remembered a time when they were children. Kelly had missed dinner, and he'd been sent to find her. When he finally did "and it surprised him that it took so long because he knew her hiding places" he noticed she'd been crying. He knew how much she missed her family, so he did the only thing he could think of and sat down next to her. After a moment, and a great deal of thought on the subject, he put his arm around her.

"John, I-I want to go home."

"I know, Kelly." He didn't like the helpless feeling burning in his heart. Realistically, there was nothing he could do for her. He hated to see her so unhappy.

They'd had the rare treat of cookies for dessert at dinner that night. The other kids had eaten theirs quickly, stuffing them down and licking their fingers. John had put his in his pocket. When Kelly leaned against him, searching for comfort, he was happy that he'd saved her two cookies, as well.

"Here."

The grateful smile she bestowed on him warmed him and eased the heartache. He decided he liked the happy feeling her smile created.

They stayed that way until lights out, leaning against each other and enjoying their treat one tiny bite at a time.

The cadet moved and groaned again. He admonished himself for allowing the distraction. It was then he noticed she was silently watching him. Pulling up a chair next to the bed, he considered what to do. Although, he was almost certain the magnums were empty. It wouldn't do for her to start firing if he surprised her. \_Sarah\_. She'd told him that her name was Sarah.

"Sarah?" He said quietly calling out her name.

There wasn't time to babysit cadets. Blue team needed to be back to the \_Pillar of Autumn\_ to debrief the attack. It wasn't common knowledge and certainly not released to the public, but this was the third attack of these Covenant soldiers. News about the Insurrectionists would pale to this new threat. While he touched her arm, he wondered if this would pull humanity together. They would require a united front to defend against the monsters he saw tonight.

"Cadet, we must treat your broken hand. Release the pistols to me."

Perhaps, he should he say, please.

"No."

"Cadetâ€¦ Sarah, you're safe. I know you're not frightened. You're in shock. The weaponsâ€¦ please."

"What is happening?" Cadet Palmer launched herself up, only making it as far as the impenetrable wall of John-117's chest. He'd already locked his hands around her wrists. "Let me go! I have to get back to the school. I have to helpâ€¦ I have to."

"Sarah Palmer, open your eyes." His words were forceful enough to get her to open her eyes. What he saw there was not quite sane. "I am capable of removing those weapons from you. I do not wish to cause further injuries."

She continued to fight him. "Let me go. I have to get back. What are you? What was that giant thing? Let me go."

Struggling in his embrace, until she finally ran out of strength and the pain from her injuries overrode her desire to escape. A long sigh went out of her and John took the opportunity to slip the magnum pistols from her hands.

"Wait."

John heard the exhaustion in her voice. But he knew it would be a long, long time before any of them could rest.

"I want to keep those."

He cocked his head at her. "Why?"

The weapons are filthy with blood and dirt. The once shiny metal scratched. By the look of them, they were no longer safe to fire.

"Because I want them to remind me of today; so I won't forgetâ€¦ Never forget."

When she sagged in his arms, he laid her back down on the bed. "We won't forget, Sarah."

"And I'll be a part of it," she said softly, but with absolute conviction. He didn't doubt her words. He became aware of her fingers slipping through his.

He stared down at her seeking fingers, and then jerked his hand away.

"What is your name? Who are you?" She tugged at his sleeve, expecting an answer.

"No one." John-117 stood, happy to get away from this young woman. She made him feel uncomfortable, and he wasn't accustomed to it. "Your classmates want to see you."

"Will I see you again?"

This question genuinely puzzled him. He frowned at her and shook his head, "Why would you want to?"

Ignoring the other cadets standing in the doorway, the Spartan headed to the armory, where he tucked the magnum pistols away in his pack. Once they were back on the Pillar of Autumn, he planned to look at them when he had some down time.

Later, Kelly joined him while he checked and secured his own weapons. Oddly silent, she worked quickly and then almost got away.

"Kelly?"

Wishing that she had never begun this conversation in the first place, she knew he wouldn't let her leave without an explanation. With a deep breath and a small voice, eyes everywhere but on his face, she began.

"When the Warthog came back without youâ€¦ I felt... No, I felt nothing. I was totally focused on the mission. Emotions aren't in our job description, are they?" She chuckled, trying to make light of what she now realized was an unprofessional emotional lapse.

John-117 allowed his hands to slide down her arms until he held her hands in his. They'd known each other since childhood. Managed to stay friends through the awkward years of adolescence and developed into an unbeatable fighting team.

In a voice so quiet only another Spartan could hear it, he tipped her chin up with a finger, "Say it, Kelly. Say it for both of us."

"Y-You once said no one could touch me because I was so fast." A blush stained her pale cheeks. "But â€" I â€"wishâ€" sometimes â€" I wish you would catch me."

The sound of a klaxon drew them suddenly apart and set them in motion. From the speakers came an announcement from the Pillar of Autumn.

"THIS IS NOT A DRILLâ€" GENERAL QUARTERS â€"ALL HANDS BATTLE STATIONS â€" THIS IS NOT A DRILL â€" INBOUND DROP SHIPS PREPARE FOR COMBAT LANDING. REPEATâ€" INBOUND DROP SHIPS PREPARE FOR COMBAT LANDING."

Their pilot followed by, "Strap in, Spartan's. We're going for a ride." As if to accentuate his warning the Pelican's airframe shook, and she yawed sharply.

\* \* \*

><p>"No matter what they tell us<br>No matter what they do  
>No matter what they teach us<br>What we believe is true

No matter what they call us  
>However they attack<br>No matter where they take us  
>We'll find our own way back<p>

I can't deny what I believe  
>I can't be what I'm not<br>I know our love's forever  
>I know no matter what<p>

If only tears were laughter  
>If only night was day<br>If only prayers were answered  
>Then we would hear God say<p>

No matter what they tell you  
>No matter what they do<br>No matter what they teach you  
>What you believe is true<p>

And I will keep you safe and strong  
>And sheltered from the storm<br>No matter where it's barren  
>A dream is being born<p>

No matter who they follow  
>No matter where they lead<br>No matter how they judge us  
>I'll be everyone you need<p>

No matter if the sun don't shine  
>Or if the skies aren't blue<br>No matter what the ending  
>My life began with you<p>

I can't deny what I believe  
>I can't be what I'm not<br>I know this love's forever  
>That's all that matters now<br>No matter what

No, no matter what"

Andrew Lloyd Webber, No Matter What, from \_Whistle Down the Wind\_

watch?v=0Tmbu7T2Xso

### 3. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 3

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 3, As the Miller Told His Tale

\* \* \*

><p>"Her face at first just ghostly... turned a whiter shade of pale."<p>

â€"Procol Harem,\_ A Whiter Shade of Pale\_

\* \* \*

><p>The Captain called for General Quarters and prepared himself to wait. His churning gut and impatience is something he takes great pains to conceal. The crew sees only the calm exterior of their commanding officer. It took a great leader and a well-trained crew who followed orders to achieve success. While he knows all of that is true and something he can trust, he still doesn't like to wait. Waiting is a thing he cannot control.<p>

Far from alone in this system, they'd kept their distance from the

other Covenant ships by holding a course that kept the planet between them and certain death.

Rescue operations and troop deployment had been going smoothly until now. Resisting the impulse to swear long and loud, he clenched his teeth together instead, pumping his blood pressure up a few points in the process.

"Captain, confirmed. Three Covenant corvettes. Dropping out of slipspace. ETA, three minutes. Sensors on full sweep."

Completely out matched now, he can only resume rescue operations, get them to a safe location, and await further orders. He hoped they send him back to Circinius IV so they can have their shot at blowing these monsters into dark space.

The Captain nodded, and gave the order to prep for a slipspace jump. He couldn't risk the ship. But one hundred Marines were on the planet. Dammit. Damn those freaks to hell. He'd stay and fight before he abandoned his people. If only he could. His fingers closed into fists, but he locked his hands behind his back to hide it.

His brusque tone was the only clue to his inner state. "Get those Pelicans on board. No one is left behind."

An almost silent sigh of satisfaction went out over the bridge. Then, with calm efficiency, his crew returned to their jobs. The helmsman and navigator plotted their new course. The flight controllers rang out the crash vehicles and the emergency response teams took position. In just a few moments, the Pillar of Autumn was turned toward her new heading. The hangar bay doors opened and the D77H-TCI Pelicans formed up to execute combat landing maneuvers.

Like the earth creatures they were named for, the ships position themselves like a flock of birds. Their final turn began a long arching path that created the smallest target area possible, toward the haven of 'Pillar'.

Against the backdrop of their graceful formation, three Covenant corvettes dropped out of slipspace.

They were out of time. The Captain said a silent prayer and called for a slipspace jump in thirty seconds. Begin the countdown on his mark.

"Skipper, the last two Pelicans require another twenty seconds."

He couldn't risk it. Captain Keyes slammed his fist into the star map. These were the decisions a commanding officer had to make, deciding who lived and who died. It never got any easier. He'd heard a saying once, forgot where, but 'The brutal calculus of war' fit this moment perfectly.

"You heard me, Lieutenant. Thirty seconds. Mark."

"Sir, it's the Spartans and the remaining cadets," the officer's voice held a note of pleading. They both turned toward the sound of another announcement.

"Captain, the corvettes have opened fire on the Pelicans. Direct hit."

It's Gunship nine-sixer, sir."

The ship foundered, fell out of formation and began to spin. Then somehow righted itself. The bridge crew stared at each other in disbelief at the piloting skills required to pull off what they'd just witnessed.

Master Chief's voice boomed over the bridge. "Sierra-117 to \_Pillar of Autumn\_. We are taking fire. Cockpit open to space. I have taken over the controls. Pelican nine-sixer, requesting emergency landing. Repeat, Pelican nine-sixer, requesting emergency landing. Barrier. Barrier. Barrier."

"He's out of his mind. Delay the order for slipspace. Get the goddamn barrier up. Prepare for crash landing."

In the cockpit, Master Chief forced the crippled ship to his will. His peripheral vision noticed a body moving as Kelly sat down and strapped herself into the vacant co-pilot chair.

"Kelly."

"Don't bother to say it, John," she commented, and buckled herself in and activating the AIE-486H Heavy Machine Gun she'd carried up from the troop bay. "Everyone is strapped in and safe back there. I can help. You know I can."

"Petty Officer, we're gonna have a long talk..."

"...Oh, come on. This'll be a great ride in. The gun is armed and ready. Step on it!"

The sudden beeping blaring from the Pelican's radar caused them to look down to see that six Seraphs are tailing them.

"We've got company!" Kelly informed him glancing at the Master Chief who had his focus dead set at the stick.

Even when the odds of his survival are low, years of training taught him to remain calm with a cool head. The beeping then switched to an alarm screaming at the pilot as one of the Seraphs confirmed target lock on them. A white dot on the screen flashed and sped towards their six.

"Incoming!" Kelly yelled at his side.

Master Chief yanked the controls, causing the Pelican to do a barrel roll to the right at breakneck speeds, allowing the screeching missile to streak past them, missing by a few meters. The Spartan put the Pelican into a tight spin and nosed over toward the hangar bay.

"The door is closing!"

"I see that," John growled. "You watch the Seraphs. I'll watch the door."

Kelly swung weapon aft and began firing. Through Kelly's skills, they left a trail of explosions behind them as they hurtled toward the \_Pillar of Autumn\_.



As the Pelican hit the deck and skidded into the barrier, the last Pelican carrying Marines also landed. High above on the bridge, Captain Keyes slammed a fist into his palm. Landing gears extended, the Master Chief's Pelican soared through the hangar and slammed onto the deck. Emergency brakes screeched as metal burned away, showering the landing strip with sparks. The tires fared no better, the intense heat having torn off the carbon tubes.

"We're in," Kelly breathed.

The hangar doors closed as the Pillar of Autumn made the final preparation to enter slipspace and disappeared.

~o~

A few minutes later, hidden in a small utility closet, Kelly was on her hands and knees trying very hard not to throw up. Master Chief stood next to her waiting for her to settle.

"I warned you."

"I wanted toâ€¦ Help me get this helmet off!"

He'd already flipped the seals open and lifted it from her head. She could run like the wind and fight like a tiger, but she'd always been prone to motion sickness. A point they'd managed to keep hidden from their trainers and especially Halsey and the Chief. When she turned her pale face up to his, John shook his head at her.

"Don't say it. Just don't."

"You might as well get it over with, Rabbit. I'll stay with you."

"That was some flying you did out there... Oh, John! Uuuughh!"

The contents of her stomach hit the sink. John held her shoulders until her sickness resolved itself.

"You're only a year younger than me and sometimes you still act like a child," he admonished her gently, helping her rinse out her mouth. She'd admired his flying without giving herself credit for taking out the entire group of Seraphs before they landed. They made a good team. A fact he acknowledged by squeezing her shoulders.

She blew out a long breath and relaxed against his hands. Kelly knew perfectly well she shouldn't have sat in the cockpit, but she wanted to experience the ride in. It was exhilarating, watching John control the aircraft and, until this moment, loved every minute of it.

"Kelly, stop." He tried to push her away, but she'd already turned and slid her arms around his waist. Their armor prevented most emotional displays and it certainly wasn't meant for sharing an embrace. Still, he lost the battle and shoved his hands over her short hair, tilting her head back.

"Kelly, I know things between us have changed. I knowâ€¦"

"I saw you looking at me the other day in the showers. I wondered if you liked what youâ€¦"

"... Stop, now. We are Spartans not a couple of teenagers with the leisure time toâ€¦"

"But we are teenagers."

John dropped his hands at his sides and stepped back.

"I understand," she held up her hands. "Don't think I don't. I just wanted to feel something," her voice wavered and she took a long breath, "for one damn minute, besides death. Something beautiful..." Then she suddenly smiled up at him and headed for the door. "Better get cleaned up before we're redeployed to Circinius IV."

"You are the most beautiful thing in my world," he whispered, with only the empty utility room to hear his confession.

"Sierra-117? Please respond." Someone was calling him over the ship's communications system.

"Master Chief."

"Sir, this is the armory. Could you come down here, please? I've got four cadets from Corbulo Academy here. They want to know when we plan to redeploy back to Circinius IV. Uh, sir? They're demanding armor and weapons issue. I do want to bother the Skipper with thisâ€¦ soâ€¦"

"On my way."

John deliberately turned his thoughts from Kelly even as he watched her leave the room. If he wanted her to stay, this is not the time. If there are words he wanted to say, he must not say them. There is no time for fingertips to explore smooth pale skin stretched over firm muscles, or listen to soft sighs as he watched her face when he does. There is no time to notice water cascading over a woman's curves.

When had this happened? How had the childhood friend become an object of admiration? When had the competitive and often irritating little sister become a distraction, a feminine form that his deepest instinct teased him into believing would fit perfectly against him?

A year ago, he realized he felt pleasure from touching her skin. He'd stared at her in wonder as her eyes widened in response and she whispered his name. When her mouth relaxed and her lips parted, he'd felt a frisson of something, for which had no definition tighten his body.

Trained to focus, to fight, and build successful mission scenarios, this shock ofâ€¦ what was it? Need, possessiveness, a hungerâ€¦ Certainly didn't fit any of those paradigms. There were missions, training, and victory over their enemies. Those are the things he was trained to do.

The Spartan pushed those thoughts away, and left the room abruptly. Heavy boots strike a clanking staccato against the deck as he hurried

to the armory. To further distract himself, he ran a diagnostic on his armor. Gratified to see the armor integrity is 98%, he kept moving. Move. Fight. Live. This was his catechism. This is his world.

Unaware of the turmoil in John's head, crew members nod to him as he passed. Other than senior officers and Spartans, he rarely spoke to the crew. Until he noticed his reflection on a shiny surface and stopped. He is up to his knees in gore and there is blood splattered over his chest and arms. The filthy armor must have been what caused them to call out to him. There's no time to clean up. In just a few hours, they will accompany the marines back to the planet.

His helmet lays forgotten on a small table in the utility room.

\* \* \*

><p>"The brutal calculus of war." Commander Shepard, <em>Mass Effect 3<em>

\_#\_

â€"Procol Harem,\_ A Whiter Shade of Pale\_

"We skipped the light fandango

>And turned cartwheels 'cross the floor<br>I was feeling kind of seasick

>But the crowd called out for more<br>The room was humming harder

>As the ceiling flew away<br>When we called out for another drink

>The waiter brought a tray<p>

And so it was that later

>As the miller told his tale<br>That her face, at first just ghostly

>Turned a whiter shade of pale<p>

She said there is no reason

>And the truth is plain to see<br>But I wandered through my playing cards

>Would not let her be<br>One of sixteen vestal virgins

>Who were leaving for the coast<br>And although my eyes were open

>They might just as well have been closed<p>

And so it was that later

>As the miller told his tale<br>That her face, at first just ghostly

>Turned a whiter shade of pale"<p>

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#### 4. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 4

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 4, Do Not Trust to Hope

\* \* \*

><p>"Look for your friends. But do not trust to hope. It has forsaken these lands." â€"Eomer, LOTR, <em>The Two Towers</em>

\* \* \*

><p>The armory was a hive of activity. Across the room, standing at attention, as if they'd been that way since brought on board are the four surviving cadets. Calm and professional, their military bearing is above reproach. It's their eyes, which revealed the horrors of the past night. John doesn't need to do the math to know the probability these cadets represented the remaining population of Circinius IV. Yet, they must check for survivors, they must protect humanityâ€| If there are any of them left down there.<p>

The cadet â€" Laskyâ€" John reminded himself, the one who showed such bravery and lost someone he obviously cared about. John wondered, based on Lasky's actions with the Hunter, if he had deliberately tried to follow her in death.

Along with the thought, came a rare pang of guilt. He could have saved that girl. However, the casualties had been so high and he'd run out of medigel. What would he do if he lost Kelly? There was a very real probability he could lose her in the next several hours. Would that look be in his eyes, too? Might he try to follow her into the dark unknown of death?

One of the cadets addressed him, forcing him to yank his wayward thoughts and wavering attention to the tall young woman who wore the mantle of authority easily on her shoulders. It's only her voice that betrayed her inner turmoil. She directed her gaze over John's shoulder when he moved to stand in front of them.

"Sir! Request permission for cadets to join the fighting on Circinius."

The other Spartans, Fred, Linda, and Kelly joined John in observing the four cadets with skeptical eyes. They lacked training, experience, and maturity. He scanned the group, Lasky, Sullivan, Orenski and, his eyes rested on the face of Cadet Palmer. Despite her dark brown eyes, which barely hold a hint of fear, pain was etched into her face. She was forcing herself to remain standing in spite of her injuries.

John reflects these cadets and the Spartan IIs are roughly the same age. Yet, they are children compared to the training and combat experience of the Spartans. They demonstrated their courage and skills to him down on the planet. However, they lack the Spartan's augmentations and stamina. Although they make a brave stand, they are wilting with fatigue and shock. After weighing the consequences of allowing them to accompany the Spartans to the planet, he decided they deserve a chance and made them a deal.

"Cadet Palmer? I left you in the Infirmary," the Spartan spoke sharply, directing his attention to Cadet Palmer.

"I'm going down with my team, sir."

"Your team?"

"Yes, sir! The four of us know the school and surrounding area. If there's anyone leftâ€¦" Her cheeks paled. She had to suck in a deep breath to finish her thoughtâ€¦ "We'll find them."

While John regarded the young people in front of him, Fred spoke up. "Let's take 'em with us. See what they can do with all that fancy education."

Ignoring Fred's comment for the moment, John makes eye contact with Kelly and she nodded her head toward the cadets. Good, they agree. Turning his attention back to the cadets, with quiet words, he said, "At ease, Cadets."

When Palmer released herself from attention, she can no longer hide her discomfort. Although she's trying very hard to hold herself together, Palmer's strength was wavering. Then Lasky does what John almost can't resist attempting himself. With a surreptitious arm around her waist, Lasky provided just enough support to keep her on her feet.

The sharp look Cadet Lasky directed at him was another surprise. John understood they just agreed they would both watch over her. For a moment, a flicker of camaraderie ignited between the two young men. John watched Lasky take a breath and nodded in his direction. The realization they spoke to each other without words filled him with additional feelings. Emotions he does not have time to explore or give definition. John pushed away the additional distraction. Although, until this moment, he thought this level of communication was only possible with other Spartans. That's what he'd been raised to believe.

"Cadets, I will consider allowing you to accompany us down to the planet once we received our mission orders. Before I allow it, I must have your word that you will get some rest. Which one of you is the best shot?"

Three heads swiveled toward Palmer. She returned their gaze with wide eyes.

"I'm studying basic sharp shooting, sir," she said, deliberately stepping away from Lasky.

"She's the best in the school," they countered, nodding affirmatively in case she showed signs of demurring. They don't know her very well. If they did, they'd know the word demure isn't in her vocabulary.

"Linda?" John turned to their expert sharpshooter. "When we head back down, take Cadet Palmer as your spotter."

Her reply was quick and indignant, "A spotter? I don't need a spoâ€¦"

"â€¦"Cadet Palmer could use more experience and take advantage of the opportunity to train with you. Linda and Kelly show these two where they can bunk. I'll escort Lasky and Sullivan. Dismissed."

Three hours later, John and Fred exited the mission briefing with very specific orders. This is a rescue recon mission only and they

are not to engage the enemy unless fired on. They exchanged a look. They didn't have to like it. The general feeling was the more of these Covenants they take out now, the less they have to fight in the future. But orders are orders and they part ways to prepare for the mission.

John headed to the Infirmary to replenish his MED kit and found Cadet Palmer wrapping her ankle. There's a line of determination between her eyes and her focus is so complete that she doesn't notice his approach. As he watched her, it occurred to him that the Cadet is so resolute that she thinks she has nothing left to learn. That arrogance will get her killed faster than a surprise attack by a pair of Hunters.

"No shame in staying behind, Cadet."

Palmer stuffed her foot down in her boot and secured it tight before answering. "Oh, really. Is that what you would do? I may not be a Spartan, but I can pull my weight. I can shoot and I'm good with hand to hand combat."

"You left out insubordinate," the Spartan observed dryly.

Palmer stood up and slipped her arms into a uniform jacket over a white T-shirt. "No disrespect intended, sir. I call it determination."

"Spartans are not immune to injury and death. Your arrogance  
â€" "

"â€" Now I'm arrogant?" She responded, continuing to dress quickly. After she finished pulling on a flak jacket, she walked directly to him and stared up into his face.

The Spartan almost took a step back. No one dared to speak to him like this. This little girl with her porcelain skin and rich brown hair spoke to him as if they were equals. Was she actually arguing with him? He offered no further comment. Simply dismissed her with an impatient wave of his hand. Then silently followed her from the room. His hooded eyes watched the set of her shoulders and a confident stride that reminded him of Kelly.

The ride back down to the planet was quiet. As the Pelican made its final approach, Cadet Orenski took a moment to brief her squad. The other three listened intently. John doesn't doubt they will follow her orders. But will they follow his?

The Spartans exchanged glances by signaling green on their HUDs and nod slightly. They agreed, the young woman was a natural leader.

The plane barely rolls to a stop before the cadets are out of their seats and forming up on the ramp. The pilot announced all clear, then in a gruff voice that warned them of what they are about to see.

"Aw, for chrissakesâ€" Prepare those kids."

The ramp lowered and the recon party descended into an abyss of destruction. All around them thick groves of pine trees burned like torches. A hot wind whipped by the heat scattered debris and ash over

their legs. The smell of death lingered in the hot thick air.

They've landed on what was left of a small public school close to the grounds of Corbulo Academy. At a signal from Master Chief, they moved to cover against what is left of the entrance wall.

April Orenski gasped, and then fell to her knees retching. They turned together to see the etched shadows of an adult and a row of children in the attitude of running for shelter. At the bottom of the wall, in the mucky wet ground lay what's left of the children.

Sullivan assisted Orenski gently to her feet and offered her a sip from his canteen. John signaled sharply for their attention and moved them away from the sewage and gore. The Spartans herd the cadets quickly away before they realized what they're standing in.

"This is worse than last night," whispered Orenski as the morning sun slowly, inexorably casts its light over the broken land. As their eyes adjusted, they see the burning granite cliffs around them. The pine trees on the ridgeline still exploding in flames when the fires reach their base. In the distance, the hydroelectric plant is silent. The standing water is rank and polluted with ash and plasma residue. It took all four Spartans to get them moving again.

When they rounded the last corner before entering the Academy grounds, they saw the corpse of General Black. Still on the ground where Lasky set him down after removing him from the Warthog. The man they once feared is only recognizable by his uniform and name tag. The vultures and wild dogs have rendered him up for food.

All four cadets stopped to stare at the remains of General Black. Always larger than life and terrifying when angry, this is the man who just a few short hours ago they had respected and even feared. Their eyes wide and the color draining from their faces. Even Cadet Lasky, who had pulled the dead Colonel out of the Warthog, took a step back.

John granted them exactly five seconds to absorb what they were seeing. When he started to speak, Cadet Lasky beat him to it.

"Move out, Cadets," the young man said, with his brow furrowed. "We need to concentrate on the living."

A vulture swooped in and attacked one of the wild dogs. They scrambled over the fleshy bone fragment, until the vulture won and flew away.

The level of violence and destruction of this magnitude could never be taught in the classroom. No battle scenario demonstrated within the sterile environment of a holotank could render the smell of blood or dead bodies bloating in the sun. Duplicate the sounds of wild animals feasting on human flesh and bone or the stunning shock of the destruction of their once immaculate school grounds.

All heads turned when Fred spoke up. "Movement. Due north, along the top of the hydroelectric plant."

Now it's a choice between taking the advantage and giving away their

position. Master Chief assessed his surroundings. Master Chief blinked green from his HUD and watched for the green light responses from his fellow Spartans. It all happened faster than the cadets could even count. Then Master Chief began issuing orders.

"Linda, pick a spot. Signal when you're in place. Move now." He turned to the rest of the group. "Until we get an idea of some numbers the rest of us stick together." Then he asked a question, he would otherwise never have to ask, "Understood?"

Everyone but Sullivan responded, "We can't just leave him here," the cadet whirled back to the group, eyes wide. "We can't."

Kelly took his arm gently but with a grip he could not ignore, "Hey, it's Sully, right? Come on. We've got work to do."

Cadet Sullivan tilted his head back to look up at the Spartan and blinked several times. She didn't let go of his arm.

"Yes. You're right. I'm sorry"

"Belay that, Cadet," she said, shaking her head to stop his apology. "We've got a job to do. Let's get it done."

Sullivan nodded, unshouldered his weapon, and blanked his face. In the years to come, it will always be his eyes, which mirrored his emotions. Cadet Sullivan didn't look back when he followed the other Spartans toward the burned out remains of Corbulo Academy buildings.

Smoke and ash billowed across the open courtyard. Dying birds flopped around on the ground until they died too. The hot winds did nothing to dissipate the stench of death.

"I wish I had armor like yours. Bet it keeps the smell out," quipped Cadet Sullivan attempting to lighten the mood.

It fell flat when Fred responded. The Spartan looked down at him and shook his head. "Doesn't come in your size, kid."

John led them along a wall, through bombed out rooms, and under debris, wherever they could stay out of sight of the hydroelectric plant. Once Linda signaled ready, they could begin their search.

John noticed someone moving close to his side. "Excuse me, sir. I have a question." It was Cadet Lasky looked up at him with a worried depth of his chocolate brown eyes. The Spartan inclined his head, to indicate the Cadet could proceed.

"Sir, if that was the first time a human colony was attacked," he began, holding back a piece of debris so the others could walk through. "I noticed their weapons. I believe they were plasma and certainly, that giant \_thing \_you killed carried a plasma weapon. Sir, are we ready to defend ourselves against such firepower?"

Two stories above Master Chief and Cadet Lasky, Palmer scrambled after Linda up a flight of badly damaged stairs. Linda heard the younger woman gasp in pain when her foot slipped on a block of broken polycrrete. With one hand firmly on her sniper rifle, she wrapped her



left arm around Palmer's waist and carried her up the last few steps.

Linda ignored Palmer's burst of indignation and handed her a spotting scope. "Know how to use one of these things?"

"Of course."

"Then get to work."

Cadet Palmer didn't argue she dropped down on her belly. A blessing, since it got her weight off her foot. Scanning the horizon, she listened to the Spartan as she readied her rifle.

Someday, Palmer mused. Someday, I'll have a rifle like that. Palmer knew her weapons systems and she was sure that was an SRS99-S5 Sniper Rifle in Linda's hands. Beautiful, elegant, and deadly. Palmer wanted one just like it. Movement blurred the spotting scope, causing Palmer to blink.

Linda signaled John, took aim, and waited for orders.

"Ten of those little guys just skylined themselves along the wall," Palmer said a little more breathlessly than she would have liked.

"Saw 'em. We call them Grunts."

Palmer nodded, "Ten Grunts at 2 kilometers. Elevation, 30 meters. Wind, 5 knots NNE."

Linda smiled and thought. Good job, Cadet. Her pleasure at Palmer's knowledge hidden behind her Spartan helmet.

The Spartan lined up her sights on the Grunt closest to her location and prepared herself to "walk" the targets with her rifle. She flexed her trigger finger, and focused on her target, her breath, and her heartbeat. Palmer shouted. The Grunts in her scope tilted sideways, or was it the rifle?

Linda felt the ground moving under her. Digging in her toes, she tried ignoring John's loud voice in her ear. Let me concentrate, she thought impatiently and refocused. Now someone was shaking her shoulder and tapping on her helmet. Then her body began to slide, the sound of dirt and debris rushed past her and clattered to the ground below.

Palmer was suddenly in her field of vision and reaching for the rifle. With whatever leverage she could manage, Linda tossed the rifle to Cadet Palmer. As gravity pulled almost 1000 pounds of armor and Spartan over the edge, Linda shouted, "Do your job, kid!"

Palmer dropped prone on the ground and aimed down the scope. The Grunts pointed in her direction, but through the scope, she could see they weren't watching her. Instead, they watched the landslide occurring just to her right. How long did she have before it pulled her over too?

"Do you have the shot, Cadet?" John's voice whispered into her ear. His calm voice helped her focus her attention to the mission.

"Aye, sir. I have the shot."

A breath, a heartbeat— an exhale. The rifle kicked four times against her shoulder. She reloaded quickly, her hands moving efficiently. She watched the next four bullets create a pop and spray of gore as four more Grunts died. The last two panicked, threw their hands in the air and began to run.

"Ammo!" Palmer sang out and tapped the top of her helmet.

"Understood," Master Chief, replied calmly in her ear. "No need to shout, Cadet. See if you can follow Linda's path down to her. We will join you shortly."

Palmer pulled herself to her knees, cursing herself for her noob behavior. This wasn't a damn firing range, what had she been thinking?

Across the debris field, she heard the bark of an assault rifle. Good, the rest of those stupid Grunts are dead, she thought as she secured the rifle over her shoulder and began her way down to where she could see just the outline of Linda's helmet. The rest of the Spartan sharp shooter is covered in debris and rubbish. She's not moving.

After a few minutes climb, she noticed the other three cadets and the one they referred to as John watching her climb. Glad to see they were safe, her focus wavered just long enough for her center of gravity to shift. Down she went.

As quickly as it began, she was plucked from the landslide. Once again, she found herself with both hands clinging to the chest piece of Spartan John-117's armor. The Spartan held on to her until the ground stopped moving.

While she tried to recover quickly, looking down at herself, realized she was filthy. Her shoulder bloomed with pain as the adrenaline drained out of her. But she managed to grin up at the Spartan. "I'm starting to appreciate you being around, sir. I plan to have a nice long career. So, uh, think you can manage to be around whenever I need saving?"

Whatever John thought of her comment or if he was aware that he still had his arms around her it's well hidden behind his golden visor.

Fred broke the spell. "John, I don't know how you can ignore Linda's signaling, but if we don't help her out of there, we'll both have to take her on."

Then over a private channel, for John's ears only, Fred chided. "Hey, Blue One. Put the little cadet down. She can walk. I've seen her do it."

Palmer found herself set on her feet without a comment.

"Dropship! Incoming!" Kelly shouted, dragging Linda to her feet.

## 5. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 5

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 5, Axios!

\* \* \*

><p>"But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail."<p>

â€" Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare, Macbeth 1:7:61

\* \* \*

><p>Linda scrambled gracefully to her feet, shaking off the debris while she checked her rifle. Their journey down to assist Linda landed them in a dimly lit area of an unidentifiable building. The word basement filtered into John's awareness. They are in the basement. Gradually, as their gaze penetrated the gloom familiar shapes begin to form. Movement on John's HUD, brought his fist up, indicating the party to halt.<p>

The four cadets exchanged a long look. They knew if that fall had happened to any of them, they'd be dead. These soldiers seemed invincible. Was that even possible, Lasky wondered as he watched Linda quickly recover. Was it something special about their armor, their training or their size?

It was difficult for him to believe they'd been abruptly torn from their beds just a few hours ago. They'd run through the chaos of screaming and the noise. Desperately clinging to the belief it was just a training scenario. A false hope proven to them when one of their classmates was murdered in front of them at the hands of the monsters. Now they were looking at a nightmare, and living the horrors of the Covenant.

Not monsters, Lasky reminded himself, wiping sweaty palms on his pants. They were soldiers just like them and just as intent on surviving. "Sir, that dropship and the Grunts we saw on the ridge line. Why are they back? The damage is done," asked Lasky. The other cadets nodded with the same question in their eyes.

The Spartan shook his head. If he knew that answer, he might also understand why he'd brought these children with him. Without them, he and the other Spartans could have taken out the relatively small group of Covenant soldiers and left this forsaken planet. Why had they come back? To gather Intel? He caught a sudden inspiration. They would be the ones to gather the Intel. He made up his mind and began to plan.

"We need to keep moving," the Master Chief declared. His deep voice brought their minds back to the mission.

The Spartan spared a glance at the distraught faces of the cadets. He knew what they were feeling, the gaping hole of failure stirring a caldron of pain in their hearts. The dark sensation came from seeing fallen friends and he remembered the same feeling when Sam died. The

lesson he'd learned from that day was strength. Find the strength to carry on, keep the strength to avenge the deaths of his Spartan siblings and build the strength to keep the mission goals in sight at all times.

His orderly mind pushed the thoughts of Sam away and calculated their chances of staying hidden down here. John lead them further into the darkness. Under the cover of the basement walls, they can plan their next move and contact the ship.

The unlikely squad of soldiers proceeded carefully through the gloom, scanning the room as they step carefully over the uneven floor. As their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness shapes and smells hidden in the shadows, become recognizable. Along the walls are mattresses and blankets. Bits of food and candy wrappers lay in small piles alongside the ramshackle shelters. Water dripped rhythmically from the ceiling and the sharp smell of urine hung in the air.

Sullivan noted the familiar red cross of a first aid kit laying open on the floor. He crossed to it and carefully gathered the spilled contents back into the container. Movement and the sound of a sob shattered the silent darkness. An angry shout echoed, "Hey! Don't touch that!."

Eight weapons leveled toward the sound and without a word from the Chief, the cadets filled in the defensive circle began by the Spartans. With their backs to each other, they continued to walk.

From out of the wraith-like smoky darkness, children begin to emerge from their hiding places. With eyes wide and fearful they stand in twos and threes and watch the armored giants approach.

"Cadet Lasky? Is that you?" A question from a fearful cracked voice faintly echoes.

Thomas searched the growing crowd for the origin of the question. Before he can locate the cadet in the darkness, a young man stands in front of him. With wide tearful eyes, the boy searches Lasky's face. He can understand his lack of trust at what is standing in front of him, so Lasky removes his goggles and helmet. A look of recognition passes between them. Before the two large tears tracking through the grime on his cheeks fall, the youngest cadet in the school threw himself against Lasky.

While Lasky hugs the frightened cadet, April Orenski has taken in the chaotic and the untidy scene before her. But it takes a series of very deep breaths before she can trust her voice.

"Cadets! On me. \_Fall in!\_"

Of all the events, which occurred to these cadets in the last twelve hours this is something they understand. A familiar thing to which they can cling. They don't need to see Cadet Orenski to know who she is or recognize the authoritative sound of her voice. The ones who can, trot toward her position and begin to form up. Several cadets move slowly as they assist injured classmates.

Lasky smiles at the boy and wipes his face with his sleeve. Then says gently, "Don't you think you should be in formation, Cadet?"

"Yes, sir!" He bravely squares his shoulders and moves into his usual position in the formation at front left, for he is not only the youngest cadet at Corbulo Academy, he's also the shortest.

"Cadets! Attention! \_Right\_ face!"

At her command, the rank and file of the remaining cadets executes a near perfect facing-movement and begin to dress up their lines. When Cadet Orenski is satisfied, she gives the command to left face, so they are facing her again.

"\_Parade\_ Rest!"

Master Chief moved to stand alongside Cadet Orenski. "Who can provide a concise sit-rep?"

An upperclassman stepped forward and assumed the position of attention. The young man's hands were torn and bleeding. There was too much blood on his shirt for it to be his own.

"Sir! When the attack began B-Shift cadets studying in the library or working out in the gym or grabbing chow had a clear exit to the basement."

"You didn't think to defend your fellow cadets or the school?" This was a harsh question, but the cadet needed to get that guilt out of his eyes. The Spartan had seen it too many times before on the faces of the marines who fought alongside him.

"No sir! Unlike the cadets in the barracks, we had no access to weapons on our level. I-I thought it best to get us to safety."

"You did right, Cadet. Do you understand?"

"I do now, sir." Then his voice gave way and broke over the words, "Thank you."

"\_Keyes to Blue Team, Keyes to Blue Team."\_ the radio crackled in the Master Chief's ear.

"Captain."

"\_You've got Spirit dropships inbound on your position, or have you forgotten about them? ETA one minute. Hope you know what you're doing with those Cadets, Blue One. 'Autumn is prepped for slipspace. Am I understood?\_"\_

"Copy that." the Chief signed off, and then turned to the surviving cadets. "Cadets, hold your position until one of us," gesturing to the other three Spartans, gives you the all clear."

"\_Linda, get into sniping position. Do not fire until I give the order.\_"

"\_Understood. \_Linda silently remarked, and slipped away with Palmer in tow.

"Cadet Sullivan, stay with these cadets."

Sully nodded, "We'll wait for you here, sir," he said before he began shouting orders to harden their defenses.

Once outside, they meet Linda and Palmer, where they'd been forced to take cover, Linda points to the sky. It isn't long before Fred's warning and the reason for the captain's orders become visible. Descending slowly from the dirty clouds like a bloated bird of prey an elongated dropship came to a stop about a hundred feet above the ground. Multiple hatches opened disgorging those very same monsters.

The Spartans neither knew nor cared how the aliens survived the fall. In just a short while the aliens would be dead anyway. The outcome of the mission scenario would not change. If they died on impact, so be it. Then the Spartans could get off this dying planet and on to the next mission. Right now, they need to put some distance between themselves and those bunkered cadets.

A couple dozen Grunts floated to the ground. Behind them Master Chief counted a squad of Jackals, their shields glinting in the dim light as they snapped on, four Elites followed them down and then a pair of Hunters. Three green lights winked on his HUD.

Master Chief turned to the cadets. "Final exam, Cadets."

Summoning the bravado they'd learned from their days at Corbulo, the lessons they'd learned and the courage they saw in the eyes of April Orenski as she faced them.

"\_Hastati Squad!\_" Their spines snapped straight in response to their name. "There's only one way home, Cadets. It's through them. Are you ready to move out?"

"Yes, Ma'am! \_Axios!\_"

The Covenant aliens are still new to the Spartans, so while Cadet Orenski speaks to the cadets, they allowed themselves a long moment to scrutinize the aliens' combat tactics and mannerisms. They had only seconds to make their observations, but that's all the time a Spartan required and they were ready to engage. Master Chief had picked out his target.

Additional movement inside the ship at one of the open hatches. A curving barrage of violet lights floated gracefully toward them and churned up the turf at their feet.

"Turret!" Fred shouted, dropping behind a rocky outcropping and aimed through his weapon's scope.

Linda and Palmer were already lining up their shot. Peering through her sniper scoop, Palmer speaks calmly and clearly as she fed information to Linda. John allowed himself a moment of satisfaction watching the two young women work so effortlessly together. Before he could force himself to move, plasma rounds splashed against his chest. A second later, Linda fired and the Grunt at the turret dropped to the ground. An armored hand reached out and yanked him down.

It was Kelly. She knocked her helmet against his. There was no mistaking the anger in her voice. "\_I don't know what's going on. You

need to stay focused. For all our sakes."\_

The ground shook beneath their feet. Fred grabbed Orenski by the collar of her armor and dragged her back to John and Kelly. "Our position is compromised, John. Turret gunner, but that was a munitions launch ordinance that just hit us. One more like that and this pile of rubble is coming down."

Linda and Palmer dropped next to them. "That's confirmed, John. Plasma weapon. Looks like a Type-52 Guided Munitions Launcher."

Palmer is nodding in agreement. "All four of the large aliens are carrying them. Sir, I thought I saw a shimmer of something moving. Tall like the others. Then the glow of a long, shiny weapon in its hands. Like a sword?"

John nodded once. If Palmer could see his face, she'd see the glint of approval in the Spartan's eyes. Good job, he thought.

"Camouflaged Elite with an energy sword," he explained quickly. "Fast and deadly." They needed to move. "Linda and Palmer move to higher ground and clear them out. Fred and Orenski, head north and flank. Lasky and I will circle around the south. We'll need their plasma weapons them to take down the Hunters."

Four calmer lights blinked ready on John's HUD. The cadets followed the Spartans down the smoking pile of debris.

Lasky noticed the grimace on Palmer's face and just a glimpse of sweat on her brow below her helmet. She shook her head at him. He ignored and moved closer, speaking quietly. "Save your strength, Cadet."

She didn't argue when he took her left arm. With Lasky providing balance for her broken left ankle were able to keep up with the rest of their squad. She smiled her thanks to him when it came time for them to split up.

Lasky decided he liked her smile. She smiled as if she knew a secret and she was about to tell no one else but you.

Linda pointed to a set of stairs. "Let's pick something solid."

Palmer nodded and followed the sniper across a once green and grassy area and up a flight of stairs.

"These were my barracks," Palmer commented to no one in particular as they climb the blasted remnants of the freshman cadet barracks.

They pick their way around bedding strewn across the once polished hallway. Weapons lockers stood gaping their contents littered the floor. The plebs had neither the time nor the experience to defend themselves. Young cadets, away from home for the first time, with their wide-eyed terrified faces frozen in time staring out from their dead bodies.

When Linda and Palmer finally stopped climbing, the cadet was nearly

crying out with pain. She ground her teeth together and pushed it away. A quick scan with her spotter's scope provided a view of burned out buildings of what had once been the pristine grounds of Corbulo Academy. Charred remains were all that was left of the foundation that taught young soldiers to be all they can be. Buildings torn apart, roofs collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. Smoke continued to billow from the buildings and the corpses.

When they'd triangulated on the Grunts, John gave the order and twenty-four carefully placed shots ended the lives of twenty-four Grunts. The Elites didn't care about the Grunts, in fact to Palmer's surprise, they didn't even check on them. No first aid. No field medic. Nothing.

She watched the Jackal's take position behind cover and the Elites raise their heads as if to sniff the air.

Deep in the basement darkness, Cadet Sullivan hears movement. It's the sound of heavy footsteps and debris moving.

## 6. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 6

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 6, Stained Glass

AN: DannyR (guest reviewer) Thanks for taking the time to review and for the kick-in-the-butt to get this chapter written.

\* \* \*

><p>"`Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run."<p>

â€"Bruce Springsteen, Born to Run

\* \* \*

><p>Cadet Sullivan's anxiety grew as watched the Spartans depart the relative safety of the underground bunker. When they disappeared from view, it took a deep breath and all his hard won control to keep from running after them. The weight of the ceiling and the oppressive air made it difficult to breath. The sounds of the cadet's pain and fear tore at his heart.<p>

At least they hadn't seen what he'd seen above ground. If he were to protect these cadets, he couldn't allow his own fears to show. The Spartans had left him in charge and these cadets were his responsibility. At that moment, Cadet Sullivan accepted the mantle of leadership by forcing those fears down. Although it burned his throat like bile, he squared his shoulders and forced his attention to the group's safety requirements.

"Sullyâ€| you hear that?" The young man who had briefed the Master Chief turned wide eyes on Cadet Sullivan. The boys stood shoulder to shoulder, listening and peering into the darkness. Then exchanged a long look when they both heard the sound of muffled footsteps, and a breathy growl.

The cadet laughed, his eyes wide, and the catch in his voice he



couldn't hide. "It's just the animals moving in to find food."

Sully shook his head and placed his hand on his friend's arm, willing him to silence. "Something's out there. Be still. Listen."

Scared, tired, and hungry were not good ingredients for silence or courage. Sully knew he couldn't take on whatever was out there by himself. His fellow cadet trembled beside him. What other choices did he have?

A ghostly shimmer appeared against the backdrop of smoky darkness.

For just a second, Sully's saw a glimpse of the thing's general shape and height. One of the other Spartans had called it an Elite. Was it carrying one of those energy swords the Master Chief warned them about? Sully's gut flipped at the memory of what the Spartan said about its behavior. That when it caught sight of them, he'd said, it would charge.

"That's not a cadet or an animal."

"Do ya think?" Sully responded irritably. What could they possibly do to take that thing down?

A small hand tugged at his sleeve.

"Mister Sullivan?"

The young boy who first recognized Lasky was asking for his attention. Sully saw the courage and determination in his eyes when he bent down to listen to the young cadet.

"Why don't we play Blind Man's Bluff with it, Mister Sullivan? If it didn't see us, we can hide andâ€¦"

"Good idea!" Sully hissed a whisper and the boy grinned.

"What's your name?"

"Nicholas, sir."

The other cadet grabbed his arm and pointed. Sully had seen it, too. Another ripple against the darkness, reminding them the danger was close. There wasn't much time. The thing will be on them in minutes, seconds if it caught sight of them.

"What's your plan, Nick?"

"There's an old-timey fire hose on the wall, sir. I bet there's still water in there and if there's not we can use it to tie the monster up!"

Sullivan ran to the wall where the young cadet pointed. The glass door had been broken long ago. The old hose came off the rack in dirty loops.

"Mister Sullivan? It took six of us to hold the hose the last timeâ€¦ so, huh..."

Sully suppressed a grin at the thought of these young cadets playing around down here. Definitely off limits. Well, if he had anything to say about it, he'd make them a damn medal. This might be their only chance. But playtime was over.

"Nick. Go get your classmatesâ€| here's what we're gonna do."

~o~

The Sangheili special operations soldier, Voro' Chonchiyo, sniffed the air and swiveled his massive head toward the faint sounds and smells of humans. Rounding up these squishy creatures was far beneath his rank and status, but he dared not leave it those yapping Kig-yar or dull witted Jiralhanae.

He didn't know what use his superiors had for the humans and it was certainly not his place to ask. Perhaps processed as food for those brutish Jiralhanae, or made into slaves. It hardly mattered.

The orders to round up survivors had come directly from the Admiralty. One didn't question the admiralty or one's superiors. One simply does as one is directed. He would earn glory and honor for his family, by capturing these humans himself. Perhaps even a promotion.

The charge on his active camouflage chirped a warning as it slowly dispersed. The dull red of his worn gauntlet caught his eye. If they promoted him, he'd purchase armor. With honor and courage to wear like a badge on his new armor, he'll catch the eye of one of the young females. It's about time he began a family. A soldier should contribute offspring for the good of the people. He huffed a laugh, breedingâ€| yesâ€| many offspring.

The Sangheili soldier stepped carefully over a pile of debris. From his position, he could see the entrance to this level. The scent of humans hung heavy in the air. He knew he was close. The fact they smelled so bad, was only one of the many reasons he hated these demons. The Elite responded to signs of movement ahead by arming his energy sword. The weapon made a metallic sound as it came to life and cast a pool of deadly blue light.

"Filthy heathens," he muttered, just before a clod of polycrrete slammed against his helmet.

Dropping to a crouch the Elite quickly scanned his immediate vicinity. While it searched for a target, a continuous blast of water hit him in the face. The unexpected assault surprised him enough that he threw up his hands to ward off the attack. The energy sword fell harmlessly to the dirty ground and extinguished.

His scream of rage froze the cadets in terror, but Sully rallied them to keep up the barrage. Before the alien monster could recover or retrieve his weapon, Sullivan dove for the strange weapon, scrambling through the slippery mud to get his hands on it before the alien regained his balance.

Sully rolled himself to a stop a safe distance away from the raging alien and secured the weapon by getting a firm grip on the handle. While the students renewed their efforts with another blast of water,

catching the looming alien full force in the chest and sent him reeling again. The other cadets shouted with triumph behind him.

The elegant weapon came to life in his hand. As he examined the illuminated blade, he wondered if he was actually capable of killing. Then he noticed the brave faces of the cadets and realized he will protect them at any cost. The finality of that decision actually calmed him.

More thrown debris staggered the Elite. Instead of falling to his knees, the creature swung his fist. Sully saw it happening, but before he could shout or move, in a burst of rage-strengthened movement grabbed one on of the young boys in his fist.

Sully leapt at the alien while he had his back toward him and raked the sword down its back. Adrenaline and momentum should have driven the sword through the Elite. But Sully swung the weapon in an arch as if it were a saber. The effect was immediate; the Elite screamed in agony and dropped the boy. The terrified cadet fell to the ground, striking his head on a patch of broken polycrete and didn't move again.

~o~

Peering through her scope, Sarah Palmer whispered urgently to Linda. "Ma'am, we're missing an Elite. There's only three now."

Linda signaled the update to the other Spartans. The Spartans responded to the news, by lighting up their HUDs with red lights.

Master Chief scanned the horizon and wondered again why they sent nothing more than a small squad of Covenant troops. He processed the logic equation while he checked his assault rifle. The answer left him with only one answer and it's chilling. They must get to the other students immediately.

Master Chief responded first, "I'll go. Finish the job, Linda. Then join us in the basement." He didn't hesitate to leave her alone. Each one of them was fully capable of functioning on their own. To the others he issued different instructions, "Form up on me."

Turning the intense stare of his golden visor on Palmer, she nodded back.

After just a few yards, Master Chief stopped, "We must get back to the survivors. You cannot move as fast as we can. You must try. Understood?"

The hair stood up on Lasky's arms as he came to the same conclusion as the Spartan and started to speak. Master Chief held up his hand. Lasky's face paled, but he swallowed whatever he planned to say and secured his weapon, "Let's go, sir."

~o~

Kelly beat them all to the entrance of the basement. Crouching down, she spared a moment to study the readout displayed on her HUD.

A roar of pure rage echoed from the entrance, confirming her

suspensions. Kelly keyed her radio. She needn't have bothered; Master Chief dropped behind her.

"Hey, you're getting pretty fast for an oldâ€|"

"Stow it, Kelly."

Lasky followed a minute behind. At the top of the hill, he stopped to wretch, but Master Chief pulled him to cover. When the young man could breathe again, and the Spartans still had their heads together, Lasky broke away and charged into the entrance. Master Chief caught him around the waist and dragged him back against his armored torso.

"Someday you will lead soldiers, Mister Lasky. Today is not the day." Master Chief cocked his head to listen at what sounded like something that couldn't really be happening.

"Kelly, can you identify what we are hearing."

"Screaming?" Unfortunately, Kelly made that comment aloud and Lasky's eyes went wide.

"Please Master Chief! We've got to help them!" Lasky struggled again.

The cadet was right, of course. Unarmed and inexperienced those cadets had no defense against the aliens. Master Chief signaled the group. Weapons drawn they charged into the gloom.

The Master Chief and his fellow Spartans had seen many things in their time fighting Insurrectionists. They'd witnessed the unbelievable horrors humans were capable of visiting on each other. Seen technology and architecture thoughtlessly destroyed. Planets devastated and bodies piled in open pits.

What they saw thrashing and snarling in a tangle of fire hose and filthy mud stopped all four of them in their heavily booted tracks.

While Sullivan held the alien at bay with the threat of the energy sword, the other cadets were busily tying the alien's limbs together.

It was at that moment, Linda and Palmer trotted up behind the stunned group. Then Kelly began to laugh. The sound of it rang through their helmets over their Spartan comm channel. Master Chief just shook his head in disbelief and signaled Fred to assist him. Between the two of them and a great deal of assistance from the cadets, they immobilized the alien. After Master Chief administered first aid to the Elite - they would need him alive for interrogation - Kelly and Linda took care of the injured cadet, he called the ship.

"Blue one to \_Pillar of Autumn.\_"

"\_'Autumn, here\_. \_Status?\_" Captain Keyes's impatience unmistakable through the comm link. Before Master Chief could respond, the Captain continued. "Time to come home. Intel or not. Survivors or not, it's time. These hinge-head bastards have begun glassing the planet. Pelican inbound on your position. Be on it. Am I clear?"

"Aye, sir. Intel, survivors and Blue Team on our way, sir. Requesting medics and security team to meet the ship. Blue one, out." When Master Chief looked up from his call, there roughly 30 wide-eyed cadets surrounding him. All staring up at him expectantly.

The Elite howled his rage and struggled with his bonds. There was no end to his shame when the demon actually lifted him off the floor and tossed him over his shoulder.

~o~Present Day~o~

The finish line in sight, Lieutenant Palmer pushed herself hard to beat the two male LTs behind her. Digging her feet into the soft dirt, she put the memories away and increased her speed.

The rain stopped an hour ago. Steam rose off their overheated bodies as they raced through the sticky mud. Palmer noticed their training officer standing in the shadows to the left of the finish line. Palmer knew he thought they couldn't see him, but with her sharp eyes, she could easily identify his familiar shape in the shadows of the pine trees. Boots pound behind her. She wondered if the others could see him, too.

Palmer pretended to stumble and one of the lieutenants swept past her. He's laughing at her as she righted herself.

\_Men, s\_he thought and sucked in a deep breath. They consistently underestimated her. Would it always be this way?

Four years ago, the Spartans treated her like an equal and given her the space to prove herself. She had proven herself, all four of them had. The lessons she learned during the time on the\_ Pillar of Autumn \_were part of her now. Palmer viewed them as gifts and she did not intend to waste them.

As she swept passed the gasping lieutenant, she thought about the Spartan she knew only as Sierra-117. Not one of those Spartans had actually shared their first names, but the cadets had quickly learned them anyway. Although she had no idea about his location, she allowed herself to imagine he would be pleased at her achievements. She also hadn't forgotten his comment about her arrogance. No, she wouldn't forget that either.

The cool shade of the pine trees felt good on her over-heated skin. One of the medics handed her a bottle of water and Palmer walked into the trees to catch her breath and enjoy the moment.

In twenty-four hours, she would leave this planet and head back to Earth to join her ODST Squadron. In less than twenty-four hours, she would become a real UNSC officer. These last four and half years were simply preparation. She felt ready. She was ready. Ready for anything. Twenty-four hours suddenly seemed like a long time to wait.

Studying her hand, she noticed a large blister on her palm. At some point on the course, the simple water blister had torn open, leaving her entire palm seeping blood. Before she could wipe her hand on her pants, a shadow within shadow moved in the trees behind her.

A large armored hand took hers. Palmer couldn't move, she couldn't breathe, but she couldn't stop her eyes from traveling up the armor-clad chest of the tall man before her. With the number 117 still emblazoned over his left shoulder just as she remembered it.

\_"John?"\_

He spread medigel over her palm with gentle fingers. "You've done well, Lieutenant."

For the space of two heartbeats, he held on to her hand. Then much too quickly the Spartan stepped back, saluted the officer in front of him and turned to go.

The timbered voice, the massive shoulders, powerful body, and the gentle touch ignited the carefully tended memories and her left hand grabbed for the chest piece.

"Wait. Don't go! I was just thinking about! How have you been?" Palmer tried to take back his hand back with her medigel-warmed hand.

"I cannot stay. We are training here too. Let go."

"I can't."

"You should."

She shook her head and tugged on his armor. "I won't."

"LIEUTENANT!"

Palmer peered over her shoulder, the last of her class were crossing the finish line. "I have to go."

"Yes," he nodded.

"Be safe," she whispered to tall, powerful man before he disappeared into the trees.

## 7. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 7

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 7, Hell Jumpers

A/N: DannyR: I will, as you request, do my best to keep this updated on a regular basis. My thanks and a Spartan smile to Xelako for the inspired idea of MREs (from her story Selfless), which in turn, lead me to a better angle on this chapter. I just discovered this. Never seen it before: youtube watch?v=wSy050JhZ7M and this one too: youtube watch?v=FtCGCJ7GGqs

\* \* \*

><p>"Dear diary. Today I taught some aliens about the foolishness of messing with ODSTs!" â€"Dutch, HALO 3, ODST<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"<strong>ODST! Commence Checklist now!"<strong>

The Gunny's voice battered her ears, and vibrated her helmet, or maybe that was just the sound of her heart pounding. Either way, she began her checklist.

\_Check harness\_

\_Secure Helmet\_

According to the United Republic of North America's calendar, today was April 13. Therefore, at 0000 hours or midnight ship's time it was officially her birthday. The Marine in question, a diminutive female with sable-brown hair and matching eyes had been born twenty-one years ago today on Luna. Her parents had wanted a boy, information they'd never actually revealed to her. She'd figured it out well before her fifth birthday.

Three hours ago, she was reclining on her bunk, enjoying the last hour of some rare downtime. At first glance, or if you didn't know her, you might wonder why such a pretty girl wasn't in college, enjoying the social aspects of campus life and the attention of her male classmates. Certainly, you'd expect her to be celebrating her twenty-first birthday differently than joining fifteen enlisted and five officers about to make their first real jump from an orbiting ship to a planet surface.

\_Check oxygen flow\_

After the terrors of Corbulo Academy, Palmer and the other three survivors had gone their separate ways. They hadn't been given the chance to say good-bye to the Spartans who'd saved their lives. Instead, they'd been briefed not to discuss what they'd seen and heard. Specifically, as the \_Pillar of Autumn's\_ CO explained in blunt terms, they were not to discuss the Spartans, with anyone. Ever. Period. The four of them were herded into a Pelican and escorted to Earth.

\_Green light team\_

Lieutenant Palmer hit the light with her thumb. On her HUD, she saw twenty answering green lights.

The training never stopped for ODSTs. There was too much at stake. She understood this intellectually, but her gut was a different matter. Although, their mission briefing had been short and more than a little light on information, in her pack were enough supplies for three days. The mission scenario dropped them in a remote location. Their mission goal? Survive.

\_Listen for go countdown\_

"\*\*Listen up, FNGs! Your Mommy isn't here today, so first one of you fucks this up, buys ALL the beer. Preparat to Drop. Launch in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6â€|""\*\*

The mechanical sound of the hydraulic mechanisms rattled her pod as

it dropped them smoothly into launch position.

\_Tuck\_

As for college, Sarah Palmer had spent exactly 3.5 years in college, bored with the curriculum. Still, she graduated with a 4.0 average, and a degree in military science. After crossing that goal off her list, she headed for UNSC Marine Officer's training. She'd had little time or tolerance for the "boys" she met on campus.

Although they'd never approved her choice to join the UNSC Marines, her parents had sent their obligatory birthday wishes. Through diplomatic channels, no less. However, that was her father. And in many ways, she was her father's daughter: Bold, brilliant, and impatient with nearly everyone.

Fuck 'em, Palmer thought and grinned at her use of the expletive. It hadn't taken long for her vocabulary to shrink down to the ODSN forms of communication. What would her straight-laced father say about hearing his one and only child talking like a Marine? Well, she was a Marine.

What had her parent's response been on the news their daughter had graduated third in her class from ODSN School? Her mother offered a new ground car and a shopping trip and her father promised her a free ride to the college of her choice as long as it meant an advanced degree in engineering. An engineer, that's what they'd wanted for their brilliant daughter. For that to occur, she'd have to resign her commission and that wasn't going to happen. Besides, she had a college degree and she intended to put it to good use in the UNSC.

So, fuck 'em

Palmer flipped over on her narrow bunk to gaze at her new set of ODSN Sniper Armor. It was beautiful armor, designed to give an ODSN sharpshooter more freedom in combat. With the standard right pauldron removed, it allowed the sniper to aim better and move their arm with more freedom. While the standard left pauldron was replaced with a larger plate to protect the sniper's arm from counterattacks. This particular variant was issued with an optic device attached to the helmet, so an Oracle scope on the SRS99 can uplink to the user's HUD.

Although she wore the Sharpshooter BDUs as a regular uniform. The actual vacuum rated armor she'd only worn twice, once for uniform inspection and the other for sharpshooter training at the range. She hadn't worn it into battle. A fact she hoped to remedy very soon.

A shout from the corridor got her off the bunk. "Lieutenant Palmer! There are about twenty guys behind me out here. So if you're naked wellâ€¦ we need a birthday present too."

Palmer threw on her PT clothes and opened the door. "Twenty guys, huh? What's up?"

"Yeah, well. They ran away. Message for you, ma'am. Skipper wasn't too happy about it coming through the way it did. He said, no one is supposed to use that channel. Then he got even more pissed when he didn't understand what it meant. Made me scratch it down on a piece



of paper and bring it to you personally."

After accepting the carefully folded paper from the Operations Specialist, Palmer closed the door in his face and returned to her bunk. What the hell could this be? Although the Comm officer's scrawl was barely legible, once she realized who'd sent the message; it came through loud and clear. She rattled the metal frame of her bunk when she landed.

\_'How's my favorite Spotter? SOMEONE didn't want to take credit for thinking up this gift. We insisted HE let us chip in. Soon as you can, check the armory. We never get a cake, so save us some, okay? Come to think of it, we never celebrate our birthdays either. Celebrate for us. Happy Birthday, LT! OOH RAH'\_

After carefully braiding her hair and coiling it at the back of her neck, Palmer straightened her uniform and pulled on her boots. She hurried down to the armory, ignoring the greetings of the crew. When the Gunner's Mate saw her, he shook his head and pushed a long leather sleeve across the counter toward her.

"Here you go, ma'am. Special Delivery."

"You mean it didn't come from the ship's stores," Palmer commented, running her fingers over the leather.

"No, ma'am. It was part of that last supply pickup."

Palmer found the brass zipper, which ran most of the way down one side. The sailor behind the counter watched eagerly, waiting for her to open the rifle case.

No, she thought, this was too special to open in public. Nodding her thanks to the sailor, she headed back to her quarters.

After she laid it on her bunk, she just stared at it for several minutes. When she finally allowed herself to touch the zipper again, her hands were trembling. Her fingers closed around the stock of a weapon.

Slowly she allowed the weapon to come into view. It was new. It was shiny, it was hers, and most importantly, it had come from the group of people she most admired in the world. They thought enough of her to send her a birthday gift. John, Kelly, Linda, and Fred, she recited their names silently in her head.

"â€| \*\*5, 4, 3, 2, 1, PODs AWAY!""\*\*

The elegant and deadly weapon gleaming in her hands was a brand new Anti-Material, System 99-S5 Sniper Rifle. "SRS99-S5 AM, Palmer breathed. Thank you, John."

Against the bottom of the stock, she found a small piece of paper. In neat block letters, it reads, 'We know what we are, but know not what we may be. Stay safe. 117.'

\_Free fall\_

The mechanism released the teardrop shaped SOEIV Pod and Palmer's butt raised off her seat. Crap! Was this supposed to happen? Was her

harness really secured properly?

The silence of space, only the sound of her own breathing to keep her company as the pods fell toward the planet's surface. For a moment, she closed her eyes and let that golden visor appear against her eyelids. The young lieutenant gained courage from thoughts of the Spartan. She didn't need to hang on to the man's armor to feel safe. Palmer began her sniper breathing and soon her heartbeat slowed and her over-excited breathing evened out.

\*\*\*PREPARE for touch down inâ€|\*\*\*

She unclenched her hands, placed her armored feet flat on the grated metal deck of the pod. With a calmer mind, she watched the greens and blues of the planet below her sharpen to green trees, brown dirt, golden fields, and the turquoise blue of a lake. The planet's atmosphere greeted her with a showery display of sparks and the sound of air rushing past her small view port.

The pod landed with a fiery thump and rolled several feet. When it came to rest against a granite outcropping, Lieutenant Sarah Palmer was upside down, hanging against the harness straps. Shit! She'd never live this down. But the grin on her face lit up the up the inside of her helmet. The doors of the POD blew open and with a deft slice of her combat knife, Palmer cut herself free of the harness. As she rolled to her feet, she heard the cheers of the other ODSTs around her.

Best fucking birthday, ever.\_ OOH RAH!\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Gunny" Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt) is the seventh enlisted rank in the United States <strong>Marine<strong> Corps, just above Staff Sergeant and below Master Sergeant. First Sergeant is a staff non-commissioned officer (SNCO) and pay grade E-7.

"We know what we are, but know not what we may be" â€"William Shakespeare. \_Hamlet. Act 4:5\_

## 8. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 8

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 8, Memories

Adult stuff here...

\* \* \*

><p>"Memoryâ€| is the diary that we all carry about with us."  
â€"Oscar Wilde, <em>The Importance of Being Earnest<em>

\* \* \*

><p>"Do you know why you're still an ensign, <em>Lasky<em>?"

The shouted words startled him to his feet. He had just enough time to close his email, before Williams noticed what he was looking at.

The picture he'd been drawing could not be easily be hidden from the prying eyes of the young officer towering over him either.

"No, sir! I mean, yes sir."

The beefy young man enjoyed holding his superior rank over Ensign Lasky. Partly because he was in fact a bully. In addition, because Lasky and Williams were the only remaining ensigns left on the ship. Navy tradition put Ensign Lasky in the unenviable position of subordinate to the Bull Ensign who was grabbing for the paper in Lasky's hand.

Although he didn't dare allow Williams to see the drawing, he was less concerned with him seeing the picture of the brown eyes than the Sangheili Elite. He shouldn't be drawing pictures of Sarah Palmer's brown eyes or the still-classified image of the alien, yet both haunted him. Drawing helped.

The only reason he slipped into the vacant wardroom at all was to check his email. The email he'd sent to her should have been answered by now, or at least, he hoped it had.

At that same moment, Williams received a call over his personal comm device. While he answered it, Lasky shoved the paper in his pocket.

Thankful for whatever deity needed to be thanked he gratefully watched Williams leave the small wardroom. Lasky's thoughts turned to the fact he was still an ensign. It angered his father, upset his mother, and gave Sarah something to tease him about. He was the only one of the four of them who wasn't experiencing much success. Sarah Palmer had taken off like a rocket. Orenski had also picked the Marines and she was already a captain-selectee. Sullivan was in medical school and a full Lieutenant.

Lasky scrubbed a hand over his short hair, and withdrew the crumpled paper from his pocket. The brown eyes stared back at him. He missed her and thought about her all the time. Probably too much, but it wasn't that which kept him from making rank, because he really wanted her to be proud of him. He had his own ideas about how things should be done. After all, he'd seen the Covenant and helped kill them, but no one wanted to hear what a noob junior officer had to say. Moreover, since the whole episode was still classified he couldn't actually lay claim to the firsthand knowledge.

He wished he could discuss this with the Spartans, he wished he could talk to the other cadets. Lasky sunk down in his chair. He'd never met a girl like Sarah Palmer before. She made him feel things, made him want to say things. The days at Corbulo taught him to hide his emotions in favor of the successful mission. The time he'd spent with her made him want to stay with her or she stay with him. None of that were really possible and truthfully, he didn't really know what he wanted.

His email stayed stubbornly quiet, while his head dropped to his chest. His dreams took him back almost four years ago.

\_1900 Hours, Observation Deck. The Pillar of Autumn\_

\_Circinius IV is light years behind them. The UNSC Halcyon-class

light cruiser, C-709 Pillar of Autumn flies true, on a heading toward Earth. Thanks to slipspace, the familiar rays of Sol will shine on her hull in slightly less than twenty-four hours, ship's time.

—

\_Restless and unable rest, Cadet Lasky prowled the decks of 'Pillar with his hands deep in his pockets. He walked until a security guard stopped him and turned him toward less classified areas of the ship. At least three different guards have done so before he stumbled across Palmer curled up on the deck by a viewport. \_

\_With a sigh of relief, Lasky dropped to the deck next to her.

—

\_Palmer raised her head from her arms. She's too tired to get to her feet as she normally would in the presence of another cadet, \_

"\_Do you know where they will drop us off, sir?"\_

\_Lasky shook his head and let it fall back against the bulkhead.\_

"\_You should rest, Palmer," Lasky said as much to himself as to her.

—

"\_I can't close my eyes, sir. Will we ever get used to this? Learn to be as tough?"\_

"\_Not today. I'm not sure I ever want to."\_

"\_Mister Lasky, how can we become good soldiers if we aren't? You know, tough as Spartans."\_

\_But Lasky is aching with grief and exhaustion and there's nothing left in him to answer the questions in those dark eyes of hers. He's spent too much energy over too many months of loneliness and ill health to keep up a brave front any longer. His brother is dead. How tough had his brother been? Tough enough to stay alive? No. Had his brother's life been wasted over a war they could never win. And, Chyler? She'd been a lifeline and his link to sanity. \_

\_That mouth of hers, pursed with annoyance at his behavior. The light blue eyes that kept him pinned to their purpose. What could he give to see her just one more time? One more kiss or just finish their first kiss. He wanted to ask her, dammit, he needed to hear her answer to his own questions. After what they'd witnessed how could Chyler still believe what they were doing was right? She believed in fighting the Insurrectionists, but those alien monsters— What about them?\_

\_Palmer turned at the broken sob Lasky tried to hide. Slipping her fingers into his, she silently leaned her head on his shoulder.\_

\_After a moment of tension, both their bodies curving, yet taut as a question mark. Until the moment came when they sagged against each other. Then breath by breath, they turned into one another. Lasky's arm went around her shoulders. She turned her face into his neck.

—

"\_I'm sorry about Chyâ€|" she began\_

"\_Don't say it. Don't say their names," he begged laying hand is on her face to stop her from listing the dead. If he heard those namesâ€| Another sob closed his throat. The flash of anger drained away and when that's gone there's nothing left in him. He's hollowed out.\_

\_But there's a woman in his arms who's reminding him he's alive. The soft fabrics of her pants and tank a welcome change from the hard planes and sharp edges of armor. With her shower-scented skin so smooth under his seeking fingers and her long brown hair so warm and silky on his skin. The delicate strands caught and pulled on his beard stubble and stroke the dark curling hair on his forearms

—

"\_Cadet Laskyâ€|?"\_

"\_Not nowâ€| forget about thatâ€| it's Tom," he answered softly, pulling her across the smooth floor to the apex of his legs and tight against him. She doesn't protest, simply curled into him, and placed both arms around his waist.\_

\_Thomas Lasky has never, in his short life, held a woman this close. It feels good. More than good. It's replenishing him. Her whispered question breathed life into him. His broken heart pumped hard, clinging stubbornly to life and forcing him to breath. \_

\_He felt her head move against his chest as she nodded. "Tom, were you scared?"\_

\_He has no real answer for her, so she catches him off guard when she looks up at him unexpectedly. Their faces are very close. With their deep and expressive brown eyes, they're mirroring each other's emotions. He knows this, because he can see himself in the reflection. Hands rose to cup her head. She followed his movement by covering them with her own. \_

\_Her sharp intake of breath attracted his attention to her slightly open mouth. There's a pulse pounding under his palm. A pink tongue darts out to moisten dry lips. \_

\_She's light as a feather in his arms, yet the curves fit against him perfectly. Lasky knew the brave and wise beyond-her-years soldier in his arms very well. Her courage and ability are powerful and obvious. Trapped between the bulkhead, the starlight, and the woman in his lap he realized this is the Sarah hidden under the armor pressed against him now. The heavy beat of her heart pounded against her ribs, as if it threatened to escape, thumping against his ribs. This petite brunette, all warm fall colors and breath of life is a like a promise.\_

\_The hoodie she wore over a white tank fell away. Without asking, Thomas pushed it down over her shoulders. His gaze fell to her torso. Firm young muscles and breasts unfettered by nothing more than soft cotton rise and fall in anticipation. There's one sensation he hasn't felt yet and he moves his tongue over his own lips in anticipation.\_

"\_Sarah?" Her name floated out of his mouth into the hush of the

moment. \_

\_This time she shook her head, or at least tries. Intends to convey to him that she's not going anywhere, because she's just as scared, just as exhausted and just as haunted. Before she can articulate anything more, Tom lowered his mouth over hers and she greeted him by returning the kiss. Ancient need coursed through his young body, spurring him on. He tightened his arms possessively around her.\_

\_This is not the dry chaste kiss he shared with Chyler the one who spent as much time scolding him as anything else. It is still a kiss layered with as much anticipation as the one he shared with her. It's also an acknowledgement of attraction, of shared experience and a grief, which no teenager is ever prepared to understand.\_

\_In an attempt to press her closer, he lifted her from the floor to straddle hips. He pulled the hoodie away and slide his hands under the shirt and over the warm skin of her back. \_

\_Their mouths broke apart and Palmer cradled his head in her arms. When she raised her head to continue her journey of placing random kisses, Lasky is suddenly jolted into awareness by the touch of a hard nipple against his cheek. With her legs wrapped securely around his hips and her arms around his head and neck she moved restlessly against him and the nipple teased him again. \_

\_Gently, reverently, Tom slid his open mouth over the impertinent bit of flesh poking against the fabric. When his mouth closed over it and he flicked it with tongue " because he really doesn't know what else to do " He did have an older brother, but girls and what to do with them was never a topic of discussion between them. He remembered overhearing them talk about something like" being 'deep in the boob.' What did that even mean? Then his instincts took over for him and he sucked hard at the firm flesh. \_

\_A startled Sarah jumped so hard he nearly lost his grip on her. Should he apologize? Shit" he wasn't even sure he could look her in the eye. Girls were always so damned direct. What if she were angry?\_

\_With a quick unexpected movement she let herself drop into his lap, the sensation of her landing on his" on his" nearly made him shout. She's suddenly very still. Good, he realized. Her arms were still around his neck and his cheek pressed against her breasts. With a little more time to think about it, he decided he liked this position very much. \_

"\_Tom?"\_

"\_Sarah?"\_

"\_I'm sor" \_

"\_No, it's me who should" \_

"\_Did you know they issue all the female cadets a birth control injection during their first physical?"\_

"\_I didn't know that," he says, surprised he can actually make a

sound that even comes out like words. \_

\_She's coming to her feet and pulling the hoodie over her shoulders.  
\_

"\_Please stay, Sarah?" His heart sank when she shook her head. Oh great, he's really blown it now. \_

"\_I should go. Someone is bound to catch us. Umâ€¦ there's something else you should know."\_

\_He's on his feet too. Tentatively, he reached out and zipped the hoodie closed. Why won't she look at him? \_

\_He finally blurted, "What else should I know?"\_

\_A blush bloomed on her face and painted her long supple neck with crimson. "Uh, they gave me my own billet." Nervous fingers absently smooth mussed hair back from her face. "It's the last one under the ladder, aft end. If you want toâ€¦"\_

\_There's no way to stop this now. He pulled her close and embraced her.\_

\_Against his chest, she murmurs, "Will you come with me, Tom?"\_

"\_Yes." A single syllable expression, which answered every other question in their young and innocent minds. \_

\_When his feet touch the ground again and his eyes focus he realizes she is gone. Oh, no. Here he stood looking stupid and dumb for so long she eventually walked away. Perfect, Lasky. Just perfect. How far ahead of him can she be? He'll just follow her to her quarters and apologize or make it rightâ€¦ somehow.\_

\_After a quick search, he found her room exactly where she described it would be. Then he noticed her hoodie hanging on the door latch. Lasky swallowed hard against a dry throat. Nervous hands, which suddenly seem like they don't belong on the ends of his arms clutch the jacket. Maybe he should just goâ€¦ nowâ€¦ beforeâ€¦\_

\_The door slid open. What is he supposed to say now? Hello comes out in a croaked whisper. Another smile set him at ease and he followed her inside. \_

"\_You left?"\_

\_She cocked her head at him, "You're here?"\_

"\_I didn't want you to thinkâ€¦"\_

"\_That you were being rude? No. Do you want to come inside?"\_

\_So that when she shuts the hatch behind him and the darkness embraced them, she moved into his arms. Then he kissed her again and cupped one of those breasts in his hand. \_

\_Throughout his life, the site of a woman in a white cotton tank top will cause him to smile at this memory. Lasky sighed when she made a

sound that tells him she liked the way it felt. They move together toward her narrow bunk and he pulled her down on his lap. \_

\_Kissing took on new dimensions in the privacy of her quarters. After he's undressed her and he will never be quite sure where he found the courage to do \_\_\*\*that\*\*\_\_. She moved away from him and stretched out on the bed. \_

\_He undressed himself quickly, casting the garments haphazardly on the floor. She's all long legs and curvy bottom waiting for him and for a moment, he forgets how to remove his pants. There's long silky hair and hands he can't wait to feel touching him again. Then words come out of his mouth, which he's never heard himself say before, "You are beautiful." \_

\_Again, she smiled to let him know she likes it. "So are you," she countered and pulled him down to her. \_

\_There could be nothing in the Universe better than this feeling of abandon and contentment. That is until she opens herself to him and cradled him between her hips and long legs. While he's placing thoughtful kisses on her chest, the tip of his arousal encounters a wet heat that until that second had been an unknown to him. \_

\_He can think of nothing else now but completing this joining with her. With all her women's wisdom, Sarah Palmer knows what this will mean to them. She's also a little afraid, but Tom is gentle and handsome and she likes the way his lips feel against hers and the way he's taken care of her since that horrible night on Circinius.\_

"\_Tom? I've neverâ€¦ I want it to be you." \_

\_He closed her wide eyes with gentle fingertips and kissed her again. \_

\_Still he held himself back. She smiled against his mouth, tilted her hips up, and wrapped her legs around his. How she knew the effect this will have she cannot answer, but her instincts are good and she trusted them. \_

\_Tom cried out as he fell into her body and Sarah gasped at the invasion. Her instincts didn't tell her about the sudden pain. She held him close, whispered secrets to him, and words only lovers know. Soon there is only the two of them moving together, synchronized, their young bodies reaching toward the other, climbing toward a summit they've only heard about. \_

\_While Tom is worrying about how he's probably doing this all wrong, his senses are assaulted with the woman beneath him. She seems to enjoy it when he touches her nipples with his lips. So he does it again. His tongue slips over the firm textures of her breast and he heard her whisper, "Tom, harderâ€¦!"\_

\_Happy to know he's doing something right, Tom opens his mouth and sucks hard. When her flesh enters his mouth, she cried out his name and arched her back up to him. And so, it becomes a game, as to which of his actions will make her cry out the loudest. She's moving out of control now and when he bites down gently, she shuddered under him. \_



\_He's about to ask her if she's okay when Sarah convulsed and her arms and legs tightened around him. It's the muscles inside the white-hot heat of her, which pulsed around him, pulling at him with a promise of totality.\_

\_Then Tom loses his own grasp of reality and began to move over her. It is a little frightening to be so out of control. But Sarah will hold on to him, she won't let go and so he moves toward it and surrendered himself. Then it takes him and her name is ripped from his lips. He feels himself dying, his sight dims, his heart stopped, his body took over and emptied into the woman beneath him.\_

\_Yes, he thought, as understanding dawned. This part of him. The thing that often embarrassed him by trying to gain his attention at the wrong time. This essence of himself that he sometimes discovered on his belly when he awakened. The part of himself he's only seen go down a shower drain as he quickly and often impatiently quiets the burning pain of arousal. This belonged to her now. It is hers and it is for her. \_

\_There was no need for words now. All questions have answers. Tom Lasky wrapped Sarah in his arms and pressed her head down on his shoulder. He bent his knees so she can slid her legs against his bottom. \_

\_Yes, this is exactly how it should be. Always.\_

The impatient beeping of his email woke him from his uneasy slumber. Jerking upright in the chair, his bleary eyes searched until he found the hoped for entry. There it was, Lieutenant Sarah Palmer. She answered him!

Hi Tom!

How nice to hear from you HUGS The only thing that would have made my birthday nicer, was for you to be here. I made my first ship to planet drop yesterday. Terrifying and fun at the same time, like when we worked with the Spa€| oops! Those soldiers.

It's been AGES since we last saw one another. I miss you and there's so much I want to talk to you about. Like why you're still an ensign! Come on, stop brooding about fighting the system and make rank! It's the only way you'll ever make any of the changes you told me about. So get busy!

URS 4VR

S

Ensign Lasky logged off, gathered his study material and headed to the ship's library to review for his promotion board to Lieutenant Junior Grade. He was still smiling when he finally closed his eyes that night.

## 9. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 9

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

## CHAPTER: 9, Whole-Hearted

AN: Very short chapter. Someone asked for more Sarah and John. Here you go. More soon.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ransom perceived that he had never before seen anything but half-hearted and uneasy attempts at evil. This creature was whole-hearted. The extremity of its evil had passed beyond all struggle into some state which bore a horrible similarity to innocence." â€• C.S. Lewis, <em>Perelandra<em>

\* \* \*

><p>The shout of a fellow classmate startled him awake. Face down on his chemistry book, Lieutenant Sullivan's cheek held the imprint of a data pad where the narrow frame scored his cheek. Two female sailors walked past at that moment and giggled. He followed their eyes to what they were looking at. Oh, God. There was a puddle of drool on the screen.<p>

Any opportunity to look stupid usually presented itself at the worst possible moment. Michael Sullivan rolled his eyes and scrubbed his face with his hand. Sullivan completely discounted the fact he had the highest grade point average the UNSC Medical School, he cursed himself for his social ineptness. Even his teachers seemed to enjoy teasing him about it. Most days Sully agreed.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant?"

Surprised from his misery by the sound of a female voice the young man looked up into a pair of the darkest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Her hair swept tightly back into a regulation style looked streaked with honey and sunlight. The oval face was smiling at him. The glint of humor lights up her eyes.

"Apologies for the interruption, sir. My classmates told me you sometimes tutored chemistry?"

There were several reasons why the female chose to stop talking. One, Sullivan outranked her. Two he was an upperclassman and three the open mouth stare was about to make her start laughing and that wouldn't do at all. She really did need help with chemistry and everyone she talked to assured her Lieutenant Sullivan was the guy. He was cute and the way he stared at her was endearing. But she had to get to class.

She stuck out her hand, "Ensign, Branna O'Connor, sir."

When he placed his hand in hers, the sensation sent a jolt across his skin that shocked him into action. His chair crashed to the floor.

"W-Would you like to sit down?"

"No, I have to get to class. But thank you. I could really use some helpâ€¦?"

"With what?"

"Chemistry."

"I, um. I -" Sully cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm really smart! You can count on me!" What had he just said? Sullivan dropped back into his chair with his head in his hands.

A familiar voice spoke behind him. The voice of a friend and his savior. "Lieutenant Sullivan will meet with you tonight in the commons coffee shop, at 1800?"

"Yes, sir! I mean, sure. I'll see you there!" The Ensign hurried away to join her friends giggling in the hallway.

When he was alone with his rescuer, he just groaned and rolled his eyes, "Thanks, April."

"You need to get your head out of those books and get laid Sully. It's the only cure."

"And you have personal experience?"

"Well, no."

"I noticed that new captain checking you out, Orenski."

She shook her head, "I don't have time for relationships. You on the other hand? we need to get you laid, Cadet," she said with finality.

Sully laughed. "Gee April you were never that helpful at Corbulo."

"Ugh, don't remind me. Come on let's get some lunch. I bet you haven't eaten today."

~o0o~

The hatch opened behind him and he hurriedly clicked the computer window closed. Never one to be startled, but what he was doing was outside of his realm of experience. Although, it was only Kelly entering the room, he wasn't ready to share this with her. There was something about what he was doing that was both scary and fun, probably because he wasn't supposed to be doing it at all. And what would Kelly think if she knew.

"I found you. Are you coming to chow with us?" She dropped her large frame in the chair next to him. "What are you doing anyway?" she asked peering over his shoulder.

"Research," he replied far too quickly and her suspicion was aroused.

"Come on. Let's go eat before all the spaghetti is gone." Kelly impetuously wrapped her arms around the Chief's neck. Chief had her physically moved away from the computer before she could speak again. The surprise on her face was obvious.

"I shouldn't have done that. Kelly? I."

"Hey it's okay. I was butting in. It's your business. See you later."

"Kelly! Wait." When he caught up with her again, he pulled her against his body and wrapped his arms around her. Into her hair he said, "I apologize, Kelly."

"I said it's okay. I'll meet you in the Mess Hall. No big deal." Straightening her uniform and striding from the room.

When he was alone, he stared at the blank screen for several seconds before thumbing the blinking green light. Perhaps this was wrong. But the smile that greeted him when the channel opened again, told him it was worth it. He'd created a connection to someone outside of his immediate circle. Master Chief and the Spartans were a top-secret group. He shouldn't be using military channels to speak to her. All that left his mind when her face reappeared on the screen.

The smile again. "You're back. I was afraid you'd been called away."

"Sarah?" Sometimes, all he could say was her name, because the other things the hungry feeling her smile gave him, the sense of security her friendship provided him only left him in turmoil. He knew they'd done things to the Spartans to temper their emotions and their libido. It was common knowledge. He'd heard it from other Marines and soldiers expressing their sympathy about how the Spartan IVs were indoctrinated. It was enough that he was aware of how he'd been changed, because there was neither the time nor the opportunity to explore other possibilities.

She placed her fingers on the screen. "I understand, Chief. You're busy and this is the middle of duty hours. Still glad you called."

His hand moved before he could stop himself and he touched the screen, matching the tips of his fingers to his. Staring into the screen, he willed her to read thoughts in his mind that even he couldn't properly identify or put into words.

"If you were here, what would we do?" The question was so innocent, so trusting any thought he might be joking was quickly extinguished by the naked emotion on his face.

Leaning forward, with a small grin on her face, she lowered her voice. "Don't you know? Don't youâ€¦ How long have we been talking like this?"

"Since you sent us the thank you for your birthday gift. One year, two weeks and three days. Tell me Sarah. Please?"

The color crept into her cheeks, "Well, just for old time's sake, I think I'd pull myself up on the front of your armorâ€¦"

"... and I wouldn't make you let go."

"And I wouldn't let you. Then maybe too old friends might share a kiss. Just a friendly kiss."

"Is that what friends do, Sarah?"

"Sure. And sometimesâ€¦ maybe, if you wanted to, you could put your arms around meâ€¦"

"No armor."

"No armor. That would be best. So much death and warâ€¦ It's all around us. I'd want just time with you to walk along a beachâ€¦ never mind, that's corny."

"Tell me about the beach."

"The sand is white and glittering in the warm sun. The trees sway in the sea-scented breeze. It's quiet except for the waves and the birds. We'd walk for hours, just talking and sharing stories."

"I want that."

"Yes, me too. And maybe after we made a fire and settled around it to keep warm you'd put your arms around me again and I'd lean against you and you'd whisper into my earâ€¦ and it would tickle, but I wouldn't show it because you're giving me a gift."

"What gift?"

"You'd whisper your name to me."

"You know my name."

"Yes, I do. I know all your names. We were kids back then and it was a game for us to find out. But \_you\_ never told me your name, so until you do I won't use it."

"You know my name. Say it. Tell me. There's so much I don't understand."

It pleased her, to please him and if she could give him a little comfort then she would. Sarah continued the story.

"The fire would burn flickering against the night sky and when the stars came out we'd lay back to watch them come to life. Then you'd roll toward me and I'd understand about what you want but don't know how to ask. I'd pull your head down to mine and this time the kiss would be more than just friends. There'd be no reason for you to feel uncomfortable or shy. Even if you pulled away, I'd understand. I get all that about Kelly. She's your first lovâ€¦ \_John\_, come here. \_Please\_."

Canted toward the screen, almost rising out of the chair, his 6-foot 7-inch body leaned toward her, entirely tuned into the sound of Sarah Palmer's voice.

Unfortunately for Kelly, she chose that moment to intrude on John's privacy again.

## 10. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 10

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

## CHAPTER: 10, The Cost of Living

\* \* \*

><p>"The cost of living is going up and the chance of living is going down." â€"Flip Wilson, comedian<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Captain selectee Sarah Palmer glanced over her shoulder before darting through a jagged formation of granite rocks. The ground is slick with recent rain and she almost slipped in the sticky mud. Her palms left rusty prints on the wet rock when she righted herself. All she had were a set of coordinates. All she had was herself. The seven other ODST marines in her squad weren't reporting in. Mike had beenâ€| no, she couldn't think about that now. Move, Marine!<p>

"Goddammit," she swore, wiped her face with her sleeve and kept running. A backass no-name planet at the backass end of the galaxy. Their briefing had been short to say the least. High ranking officer needs extraction. Carrying valuable asset. Cole protocol in effect. Do not return without both assets. No questions. Turn to, Marines.

And that had been it.

Six hours later, they obediently gathered their gear, climbed inside their pods and noticed the small windows were blacked out.

"What the hell is this, LT? It's not like we're FNGs, am I right?"

When the rest of her team joined in to grouse at the restrictions. She shut them up quickly. "\_Stow it\_, Marines. We've got a job to do. Any of you candy-asses want to step aside go right ahead. Of course, the rest of us reserve the right to tell the story. "

The launch sequence began. Lieutenant Palmer shouted her usual warning. "Grab your balls, gentlemen."

"S'okay if we grab those perkyâ€¦"

"Shut up, Jake. Give it a rest."

"Just saying, Steve. It'd go a long way toward making us feel welcome toward whatever the fuck we're headed into."

"In your dreams, Jake. In your dreams. Ready, hell jumpers? Where's my Christmas tree?"

Her board lit up with seven green ready lights. The bridge acknowledged her ready signal.

"Jesus Christ! Duke is snoring. Dude! Now's not the time to start dreaming about Sarah's ass etc."

Palmer didn't very hard to stop their chatter. She knew these men, their skills, and their capabilities. As long as they sniped at each other they were awake and combat ready. Teasing went with the job and

she could give as good as she got. They were a great team and the shared dangers of their missions solidified their devotion to one another. They'd held each other's head when they lost it from too much alcohol and saved each other's lives a dozen times. Mike, the rebel. He rebelled against everything. Jake the country boy and the smartest tactician she'd ever met. Steve, the team's medic and Orlando her weapons specialist. Rich, the quiet one knew more Intel than the bosses. Bright, eclectic and a complete tech geek and she knew better than to question Rich's methods.

Together since graduating from ODST school, they were something of a legend. Four years was a long stretch for a team. The battlefield tended to shorten their lives by a few years. Palmer ran through her own good luck check list, by placing her hands on the butts of the magnum pistols on her belt. She'd had these since Corbulo and they accompanied her on every mission.

One of the guys kept track of their missions by carving their kills on a rifle stock. She couldn't remember the count. It was either twelve missions on eight planets or eight missions on twelve planets. None of that mattered to her, she loved these guys, she loved the freedom and adventure and she didn't want it to end. Ever.

\_10, 9, 8&acirc|\_

"Launch checklist?" Her crew answered with blinking green lights.

\_7, 6, 5, 4,\_

The hydraulic arms groaned in protest moving the pods into position.

\_3, 2, 1...\_

The sudden shock of dropping at near light speeds from a spaceship shoved her stomach up into her throat just as it always had. Through her headset she could hear the faint sounds of snoring. Palmer monitored the feeds from the other PODS from the small console between her knees. She smiled, not a single heart rate showed above 80. Wait, one showed 110. What the?

"Hey, Jake. You jacking off in there? Your heart rate is elevated."

He gasped in mock surprise. "Ma'am, how could you think such a thing. I'm just sitting back thinking about how I got the prettiest LT in the Marines. Ain't that right, boys?"

A chorus of \_Booyah\_ followed.

"I will not show you any part of my anatomy, Jake. But I will show you my boot up your ass if you don't straighten up. 520 km! Begin landing checklist."

At this altitude, they were still in the exosphere of the planet below. Silence reigned as the POD's auxiliary engines began to slow them down and set up their angle of insertion into the thermosphere.

The team had just begun reporting their checklists when a proximity alarm sounded and something hit her pod hard enough to knock it off course. Two of her team were shouting into the radio. Their heart rate and respiration spiking.

She had to get their attention. "Sitrep, now. Sound off."

"Atmo leaking. Something hit me. I can't see it! Can you see anything, Steve?"

"Negative. Whatever hit us, knocked out my nav comp. I'm flying blind. LT we can no longer be certain we're angled for safe insertion."

"Check your seals, Jake. Hang on. We're just a 120 km to LZ. All of you focus. Quick as we're on the ground we check each other."

The ship wasn't responding to her hails. No way to know where or what they were landing in. Something had hit them. Palmer thumbed a switch to launch a buoy to mark their location.

"An EMP?" Palmer offered into the tense silence.

"I think so, LT. It makes sense. But who and why?" Mike's question troubled all of them, because this mission had been FUBAR from the get go.

Palmer heard Jake's labored breathing. "You staying warm in there, Jake?"

"Yes, ma'am. L-looking forward to some nice warm... weatherâ€|"

"Each of you check your landing gear. Prep for hard drop." Palmer ordered, keeping her voice clear and steady.

The planet's atmosphere sparked against the hull as friction built. They can't see it, but the silence of space is gone. The creaking and groaning of the POD is deafening when you can no longer see where you're headed. With kilometers to go before they'd be on the ground. It needed to happen now. Get the hell out of these pods and get to work. That's all they needed right now. Focus and purpose.

80 km... If she could just get her men on the ground. In seconds, they would land and what would they find?

At 50 km Jake's heart rate flat lined.

"LT, it's been an honorâ€| controls are outâ€| so cold. Maybeâ€| call my Momâ€|" Mike stopped talking when his heart monitor went silent.

20 km.

She had no way of tracking their landing. They were dying in the air; it wasn't supposed to happen this way. Her POD filled with the acrid smoke of an electrical fire. Her boys would want to die fighting. Not like this. Like animals trapped inside a burning building.

15 km



10 km

5 km

Palmer's POD hit the ground and rolled, by the time it came to a stop she was unconscious. Lucky for her, the rolling action put out the fire from reentry. Inside, her head snapped back against the straps and a trickle of blood seeped from her nose and mouth, filling her throat with blood.

~o0o~

The first time she regained consciousness it was to someone rolling her on to her side and clearing her mouth and throat. She gagged on the gloved fingers.

"I've got you, LT." It was the sound of Mike's voice.

"Mike? I saw you flatline. Others?" Palmer asked and spit a clot of blood from her mouth.

"I'm okay, ma'am. It was either my electronics frying or the impact started my heart again. Here," he said, holding a canteen to her mouth.

"Look for the others."

"Will do, just as soon as I get you on your feet."

Pulling on his arm, she forced herself to stand. "Good to see you, Mike."

"Likewise, ma'am. I see some scorch marks. Let's start there."

Together they made their way across an open field, following the trail of carved up earth and burned brush.

They found Jake first. He'd made it out of the POD. No, Palmer noticed as she knelt next to him, he'd fallen out when the hatch opened automatically. He lay there like a rag doll left out in the rain. When she touched his arm, she knew. The only thing holding his broken bones in was the armor. Her hands trembled when she gently lifted his dog tags from around his broken neck. Mike's hand landed on her shoulder.

"Son of a bitch."

"Gather the weapons, food and medkit. We'd better keep moving."

"Aye, LT."

Then just on the edge of her vision, something in the distance glinted in the sun. "Mike! Get down."

He was just stepping out of the POD with his hands full when the bolt hit him. Bone and blood burst from his chest and mixed with the burning purple plasma.

"LT?" he asked, eyes wide. The equipment fell from his grasp and he slid to the ground.

Forcing down the scream of rage threatening to tear itself from her throat, she crawled to the downed POD. The act of reaching for Mike's dog tags would put her in the line of fire. Behind the cover of the POD, Palmer pulled her sniper rifle from her back and using Mike as a prop sighted down the scope.

One breath, wait for the bottom of the last heartbeat, squeeze the trigger. A cloud of purple mist exploded in the midday sun. Sarah Palmer counted, one.

At two, she was on her feet and firing at the Grunts trying to escape her wrath.

"YOU BASTARDS!" She choked over the hot tears on her cheeks. All three Grunts fell. It wasn't until she reached the treeline that she noticed the Brut and an Elite in her cross hairs. She'd have to reload before she could get them both. The Elite had her in his sights. She was out of time. Palmer fired off her last shot and rolled into the underbrush.

A bolt of plasma hit the ground next to her head. Only one shot? Good, she thought. Maybe she'd gotten the Brute.

A fallen tree lay twenty meters ahead of her. Tossing a grenade to her left as hard as she could to distract the Covies, she waited for the explosion and ran for the tree. The large circular area of the tree roots provided her enough cover to try her comm equipment.

She thought hard, clearing her mind for what had to be done. Once her breathing evened out she recalled Admiral Kovalic's code name.

"Watch Dog, this is Sniper One. Do you copy?"

In just a few seconds she had an answer.

\_Sniper One. This is Watch Dog, good to hear a friendly voice.

—

## 11. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 11

Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 11, Danger

\* \* \*

><p>"And I say also this. I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes." — C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Palmer keyed the radio, "Understood, Watch Dog. Got your fix."<p>

\_Bring your friends, Sniper One.\_

The warning was not lost on her. If only she could bring her friends. Wishing would not bring back her team, and if she kept moving, she might run across a survivor or two. Her very survival depended on her ability to keep moving. After memorizing the Admiral's location, she turned off the radio and shouldered all the weapons she'd salvaged. Stuffed a backpack with water, food, and med kit and crept slowly through the underbrush until she was clear of the area where she'd last seen the Elite and the Brut.

The bottom of the ravine afforded her enough cover as she made her way to the Admiral's location. Moving quickly from boulder to boulder, she stopped every few yards to listen. Although she saw no sign of the other PODS at the bottom of the ravine, she found a small stream. The ground was wet and muddy. Stepping carefully, she watched for other tracks but saw none but the small imprints of animals.

After an hour of walking, dark, thick clouds blew toward her across the hills about three kilometers ahead. An icy wind preceded it blowing her scent behind her. She moved faster hoping she could change her position quickly. If she remained downwind of the Covies their chances of catching up with her increased. Taking a chance, or, as she told herself an educated guess, she began to angle her path up the other side of the ravine away from the Covies. A rock scree slowed her progress and her boots sank into the soft soil, still soupy from the recent rains. Breathing hard when she arrived at the summit, she was careful not to skyline herself by standing. A quick survey found nothing but empty land.

Just ahead nearly hidden behind a spray of clinging vines was a cave and just maybe one of her team had taken shelter. Staying quiet, she ran for it and slipped inside just as the rain began again. A quick scan of the interior with her flashlight yielded nothing. Not even another animal to keep her company. When the cave proved empty, Palmer nearly cried aloud with disappointment. The only thing she really wanted to do was search for her team. The mission came first. It always came first. Her personal feelings don't matter, and she must forge ahead.

The rain would offer her even better cover. She would need all her strength to make it to the coordinates. After quickly relieving herself at the back of the cave, she checked her suit and gear. Then Lieutenant Palmer stuffed down an energy bar, took a sip of water, and replaced her helmet.

The rain came down in icy sheets, pounding on her head and shoulders. For a moment, her vision blurred. Crouching at the entrance, she allowed just a minute for her visor to clear and orient herself in the limited visibility.

An animal trail disappeared over the edge of the hill to her left. Once she decided to follow it, she moved out. Scanning for moment, the HUD reported nothing. After the impact of her landing, she wasn't sure if she could trust it.

A threatening growl shot a bolt of adrenaline through her, and she whirled to face whatever stood behind her. A hairy paw knocked the

weapon from her hand. Then the Brute grabbed her arm and shook her hard. The weapons she'd so carefully collected clattered down over the rocks. Nearly twisting her arm out of its socket, she cried out in surprise and pain. When it released her, mainly because the sleeve her armor and glove ripped away, she rolled as far as possible and grabbed for an assault rifle still within reach. The dripping weapon felt slippery.

Skittering backward, she tried to aim at the Brut thundering toward her. The fact that it hadn't already killed her told her he meant to toy with her for a bit. Perhaps, just as it had with her team.

She regained her feet on the ridgeline and fired off one shot at the pursuing Jiralhanae. The spray of bullets knocked the Spiker out of its hands, and it roared in pain. Palmer took advantage of the moment to run. The other side of the ridge dropped off quickly, but she had to move. A spray of Needler fire whipped past her head just as she fell off the edge. Free falling twenty feet she landed and rolled.

Scrambling quickly to cover, she cursed her weaker left ankle when she stumbled. The ankle she broke at age sixteen, fighting for her life on that horrific night at Corbulo Academy. She'd always told herself she'd get the damn thing rebuilt. Maybe, she chuckled softly; she'd get it rebuilt with a few Spartan parts.

The bottom of the hill leveled out into a flat meadow of granite boulders and scrub pine. The chattering of Grunts warned her of what's ahead. Reloading the assault rifle, she knelt behind a rock and waited.

Predictably, they ran out from the trees and toward her. This time she didn't miss the grenades gripped in their hands. Another situation of life or death, if she fired on them, she'd give away her position. If they got to her, she'd be dead in an explosion of shrapnel or plasma. She aimed down the barrel and thought about how much hated those disgusting skittering creatures. She hated their stupidity and their smell. Palmer silenced them forever with a quick spray from her rifle. She sprinted past their torn, bleeding bodies, retrieved the grenades and kept on running.

The Brute behind her revealed his location by knocking loose a landslide of rocks. Palmer turned and threw a grenade in the general direction. Another roar echoed through the rain-drenched rocks and trees.

"Got you, you son of a bitch!"

Within a mile of the admiral's location, Palmer nearly stumbled into a clearing containing a drop ship and several covies. She skidded to a halt and left a bloody handprint on a granite rock. With only seconds to make a decision, Palmer aimed for the Elite, the shot rewarded her skill with a cloud of purple vapor where his ugly head used to be. The two Jackals succumbed to one grenade and a spray of bullets, which tore quickly through their shields. The pack of Grunts burned away with a single plasma grenade. Their screams of pain faded as their bodies disintegrated in the super-heated wave of plasma.

Palmer forced herself to wait a full minute before she cleared the

area of weapons and moved off. She discovered them on the far side of the dropship. Tossed down like discarded, broken toys, were the remains of her team. Three of the PODS lay dismantled where covies had been tearing them apart. A silent scream tore through her, ripping her insides to pieces. Bile rose in her throat, burning her mouth and forcing the contents of her stomach out.

If it took the remainder of her life she renewed her vow to kill every single one of these filthy monsters for this. Gradually she found herself in a dreamlike trance fueled by rage and grief. Slowly and methodically, she pulled the dog tags from each of her boys. Steve's Saint Christopher medal lay exposed over his bloody chest. He wouldn't need it anymore.

As if they were standing next to her, she heard them yell \_run, LT. RUN!\_

She couldn't leave the tech behind, so just before she turned to run, she tossed a grenade into the drop ship. The explosion was gratifying, and the concussion knocked her down. Climbing to her feet, she moved into the cover of a large stand of scrub pine.

Unfortunately, all her activity, although productive, gave the Brute a clear route to follow. Now she had to worry about leading the damn thing straight to the admiral's location. She had to take that bastard down.

She washed her face and rinsed her mouth, with a splash of water from a canteen. Then struggled out of her damaged armor. Quickly, before she could read the nametag she donned the upper section of one her team's CQB chest piece she'd found discarded in the dirt. The armor warmed her arm and hand now that it's covered and protected again.

Lieutenant Palmer reloaded the assault rifle, pulled herself together and set out at a trot through the trees. Although the rain had finally stopped, the ground was soaked and muddy. The pine trees dripped with rainwater, but the birds had come back out and that was a good sign the rain had stopped for a while.

Fatigue seeped into her bones and muscles. Dammit, she was better trained than this. However, she knew the combination of emotion, exposure, and isolation could poison a soldier before they knew it was happening. Drag them down to a dark place where they feel guilty for being alive. Exhaustion tricked the mind into believing it was okay to slow down and rest. That would not happen to her. She wouldn't allow it. Nothing less than the best of the best, she'd always told herself. She might not be a Spartan never mind. That shouldn't matter, what mattered was that she kept moving and fulfilled the mission requirements by rescuing the admiral.

She glanced down at her chrono. Five hours since they'd landed and the mission clock was still running. She was actually ahead of schedule. That lifted her spirits, and she increased her speed.

Below her, in a shallow bowl of a valley, she saw the remains of a building. Smoke still curled lazily into the air as the last of the fires burned out. Palmer crouched down and turned on her

radio.

"Watch dog. This is Sniper one. Do you copy?"

\_Loud and clear, Sniper one. Let's get moving.\_

"Understood. One minute to your location."

\_Excellent. I'll just make a quick call and meet you at the north end of this building.\_

"Copy. Sniper one, out."

Within that minute, she stood at the north end of the building. Then to the south, she could just make out the sounds of aircraft. Three Pelican's suddenly appeared over the treetops. Two peeled off from formation and began firing into the trees. Had there been more covies than she'd seen. The bottom fell out of her stomach.

A man cradling something in his arms exited the building. He grinned when he saw her. "Here can you take this? My damn leg started bleeding again."

Wrapped carefully in a glass chamber, was the item she was here to rescue. It wasn't her job to inquire, just get these two objects safely out of here.

The Pelican dropped into the clearing just a few yards away. The pilot dropped the ramp and waved at them to hurry up. The crew chief ran to them and grabbed the admiral to help him into the aircraft. Palmer followed behind. Glad to get the hell of this rock, she had to put the grieving aside for the moment. Even now, now that she was safe, now was not the time.

Before ducking inside the plane, Palmer stopped to look in the direction she'd just come. She offered a silent goodbye to her team. She would never see them again, never get drunk, laugh, or teased about her \_ass\_ets. She would miss them, quite probably forever.

An angry roar turned her attention toward the aft end of the aircraft. She actually saw the Brute, before he saw her. The thing didn't hesitate to aim. Time seemed to slow down as she watched the muzzle blast light up the end of his weapon. The round of spikes hit its intended target, sliced through her armor, and embedded itself in her chest, shredding muscle and splintering bones.

She screamed once before everything went dark.

\* \* \*

><p>halo dot wikia dot com wiki / Sarah\_Palmer

## 12. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 12

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 12, Darkness and Silence

AN: As many of you may have noticed, I took this section straight

from Palmer's bio on the Wikia. Then I totally and completely forgot to include the part about the Warthog, and the Elite with the Gravity Hammer. GAH! What I thought I would try, is to let the Admiral tell the rest of the story during the mission debrief. Thanks for dropping by and for the kind words.

\* \* \*

><p>"Space is disease and danger, wrapped in darkness and silence!"  
â€"Doctor Leonard McCoy, JJ Abrams <em>Star Trek<em>

\* \* \*

><p>Doctor Michael Sullivan heard the announcement over the speakers, dropped his fork, abandoned his lunch, and sprinted for the Emergency Room. He wasn't supposed to know about the marine they were bringing in, but he did. Lasky caught up with him outside of the ER entrance and they hit the doors together.<p>

Outside on the landing pad, the sound of a Pelican's engines drowned out most of the sounds, but Lasky heard the ER crew shout her name over the din. Both men followed the gurney into the treatment area. Sully tossed Lasky a white coat just before they entered the room.

"Hey doc, got as sec?"

Sully turned quickly back to the pilot. "What can I do for you?" He said, with an eye toward the exam room.

"I've got this," he held out a worn and dirty backpack. "It belongs to the LT weâ€|"

"I'll see she gets it, Captain. Thank you."

"I've got this," Doctor Sullivan announced as he entered the room with quick strides and tossing the backpack to Lasky. The effect of his voice was immediate and nurses and interns stepped back, waiting obediently for his direction.

Lasky's eyes widened at Sullivan's display of leadership. They'd all changed over the last years, and they were no longer the young cadets from Corbulo Academy. Palmer found success and a place with ODST, Orenski and he were taking leadership classes and on the command track. Their old friend Sully, now Doctor Sullivan, held the rate of Lieutenant Commander and specialized in aerospace medicine and trauma care. Due to the war, those two specialties often went tragically, hand in hand.

He finally located the familiar oval face through crowd of medical personnel. She's so still, Lasky noticed. The fringe of her lashes are visible against the deathly pale of her flesh and there's blood in her hair. The staff quickly peeled away the blankets and efficiently hooked her up to various machines. Lasky didn't recognize any of them. Yet, his mind zeroed in on the sound that signaled her heartbeat.

When they peeled away the final blanket, Lasky had to force himself not to look away. Although, Lasky and Sullivan knew they were bringing her in, they didn't know the extent of her injuries. Sully

locked eyes with him across the body of their friend.

Naked under the last thermal blanket, one of the nurses quickly threw a blanket over her hips. There was no reason to drape her chest, no reason for modesty, because what was left of her upper chest was a bloody mess. They both had seen this type of injury before. They knew what it was and listened many times to the screams of the soldiers dying in agony as the Needler rounds chewed up their insides.

\_Sarah, \_Lasky's heart cried out. This wasn't just any soldier. This marine was his friend and onetime lover. Since that night and for all the days, months and years since, he had loved her. He'd known her passion, her unyielding determination and seen her courage. He loved her plain and simple.

A man entered the exam room and addressed Doctor Sullivan directly. "Doctor, I'm Admiral Kovalic, the person her team came to rescue. You take care of this girl. What she accomplished out there, franklyâ€¦" he looked down at her and touched the mattress. "I've never witness that kind of courage before. I'll let you get to it. She's got more injuries than just that Needler wound."

"Yes sir, we're rehydrating her now and the blood is on the way."

"I'll let you get to it, then. Got a debriefing to get to," he said roughly, trying and failing to hide his emotions. "You take care of her."

"Aye, sir. I'll keep you posted on her progress."

"Thanks, son." The Admiral gripped Doctor Sullivan's shoulder and left the room.

One of the technicians looked up from his machine, "Sir, there's heart damage."

"I see it. Thank you. She's as stable as we can make her. Let's get her prepped for surgery."

His team sprang into action. While they worked, Lasky managed to move close to her. He took her hand and bent down to whisper in her ear. "Sarah? It's Tom. I'm here. You hang on. Promise?" She responded by squeezing his hand. Tears stung his eyes, "I promise I'll be here when you open your eyes. They're taking you to surgery now."

She squeezed his fingers again and the cart began to move, forcing Lasky to jump out of the way. Doctor Sullivan moved closer to his friend and they watched the cart leave the room.

"You don't have to say it. She's so cold. So, no empty comfort about how she'll be okay."

Lasky felt a hand on his shoulder, "I wasn't going to, Tom. She's beat up, weak and that Needler round should have killed her. It was just luck that it missed her heart."

"I'll be in the waiting room, Sully. Come find me?"



"You know it. There's plenty of really bad coffee in the surgery waiting area, go get some."

With the backpack in hand, Lasky found a corner and opened the pack. Inside, he found ration bars, water, and first aid supplies. In one of the side pockets were a pair of Magnum pistols. Odd, he thought as he examined them, the worn grips held faint purple stains. After securing the weapons, he placed them back in the pocket and zipped it closed. Deep inside he found another zippered compartment. His fingers experienced the chilling sensation of metal and chain. Gathering them up with his fingers, seven sets of dog tags fell into his lap. A shiver danced up his spine.

Seven. Seven dog tags represented the exact number of the enlisted members of an ODS team. Lasky untangled a smaller chain, the front was an image Saint Christopher the back was engraved. \_Be safe son. Love Mom.\_

Lasky let his head drop back on the wall behind him. She'd lost her entire team on that mission. The team he'd never met, but knew well because of the stories she told him of their adventures, their crazy times and the love and pride she held for each and every one of 'her boys' as she often referred to them.

\_This war! This goddamn war! \_Lasky bent his head and gave in to the grief. He was helpless to change any of this and equally impotent to help her get through this kind of loss. All he could do was be strong for his friend when he shared this with her. This wasn't the kind of loss you got over and put behind you. This blew a hole in your heart and left it there, never healing and always an aching pain.

\*\*~oO~\*\*

It began with a tickle at the back of her throat. She tried to clear it but something was in the way. Then she heard it, a ventilator close by was pushing air into her lungs. She tried to ignore it. But she was thirsty and her stomach was growling. Then her gag reflex kicked in and she struggled not to panic over the tube stuck down her throat.

Fuck this, she thought. With the hand that wasn't tied down and full of tubes, she managed to locate the valve and deflate the balloon holding the breathing tube in place. When she felt the tube move, she yanked it out of her throat and tossed it across the room. It landed on the cardiac monitor, which sent it shrieking into an alarm state. The ventilator went next, beeping frantically.

Technicians filled the room. Two of them tried to hold her down.

"Let me go! I'm fine! I need to check on my team!"

"Lieutenant Palmer. You will lay still and behave or I will sedate you."

"You'd better do what he says, Sara. Sully's your doctor. I think he means it."

Palmer jerked her head toward the familiar voice so fast she saw

stars.

"Tom? Tom!" She tried to rise up and embrace him but the effort left her gasping with pain. She had to settle for Tom sitting on the edge of the bed with his hand clasping hers against his chest.

Blinking her eyes to focus on his face, tears began to blur her vision. Tom wiped them away with his fingers. "Shhh," he said soothingly. "It's okay, Sarah. You're safe and on the mend. The surgery went fine."

"Tom, it's so good to see you. I feel stronger already."

"Well, I'll take that as a compliment. It's good to see you, too. Been too long."

"You're all grown up," she said, studying his face.

"And you've grown even more beautiful. I missed you, Sarah." The hand that had been smoothing her hair caressed her cheek and he gave into the urge to kiss her. "Before you tell me about a secret husband or some hunky ODST boyfriend, I'm going to kiss my old friend."

Careful not to jostle her or disturb the machines, Lasky pressed his mouth to hers. The world shrank to just the two of them and the memory they created so long ago. She tasted of medicine, blood, and sorrow. He tried to pull as much of her pain into him as possible with his touch. Her fingers managed to find their way into his thick dark hair.

"I don't remember being scared on the mission, but I'm scared now. Tom, what is it? What don't I know about? Tell me."

"Not now, Sarah. We have to go easy," he said softly so that only she could hear. "If Sully sedates you, I won't be able to look into your pretty eyesâ€¦ You almost died, Sarah. Be still for a while longer."

"Whatever it is. I want you to be the one to tell me. Promise?"

"I promise," he kissed each eyelid to make her close her eyes. Go back to sleep now."

\*\*~o0o~\*\*

Admiral Kovalic paced the briefing room. These desk bound paper-pushers had no idea what it was really like out there. Goddamn them, anyway. He tried again, "I tell you, I know what I saw. She took a Warthog from the back of the Pelican and used it to kill an Elite."

"The Elite with a gravity hammer?" They shook their heads and glanced at each other in amusement. "I'm sorry, sir. No one, but a Spartan could do something like that."

"It doesn't take a Spartan! It takes a soldier with guts, courage, and the drive to complete a mission no matter the cost. And this cost her plenty. Her entire team died out there!" He slammed his fist on the table to emphasize his words.

"Admiral Kovalic, that's quite enough. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the viability of the A.I. you retrieved."

"No! You will hear me out! When I crawled out of hiding, expecting to see a team of Marines, here comes a single officer. I don't think she was even aware of her injuries. She just locked eyes on me and kept walking. I called for pick up as fast as I could key the radio. Then just as the Pelican landed, the Elite showed up. We both fired our weapons, but with that fucking hammer shaking the ground, neither one of this could get a bead on him.

Then quick as you please, she sprinted to one of the Warthogs in the back of the Pelican, fired it up, and directed the thing at the Elite. The first time it jumped out of the way. I thought he'd get her then, because she had her back to him now. I fired on him again, trying to distract him and give her enough time to turn the vehicle around. But he swung that hammer again, just as she hit him. This time she crushed his lower body against a tree. Then just like goddamn General George S. \_fucking\_ Patton, she pulled out those Magnums of hers and blew his head off.

The Brute, which had probably been following her, all along, got his shot at her just as she entered the Pelican. I watched her stop and turn around. She looked out over the area for a second, just one second. The next thing I knew she cried out and her body flew back into the aircraft. By God, I've never seen anything like that kind of courage."

Spent, Admiral Kovalic dropped into a seat and gulped down a glass of water.

\* \* \*

><p>en . wikipedia wiki George\_S.\_Patton

www . guns 2011 / 06 / 17 /  
the-known-and-lesser-known-carry-guns-of-george-s-patton/

"Those handguns of his, by the way, had stories to tell. He initially carried **\*\*twin Colt single-action Army .45 revolvers\*\***, but after he gave one of them to a Hollywood star he admired, because of the star's courage to entertain front-line troops in combat zones, he replaced it wit inch **\*\*Smith and Wesson .357 magnum\*\***. Part his this flamboyance was those **\*\*ivory-handled revolvers\*\***. The general, however, knew the importance of inspiring his troops, and his flamboyance certainly achieved that goal."

### 13. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 13

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 13, Heaven Sent

\* \* \*

><p>"I know our days are heaven sent<br>lord knows I know not where they went  
>shake my head and I wonder how<br>I'll ever get to heaven now

>~o~<br>An angel came one winter dawn  
>you shoulda seen what she had on<br>wind was whistlin' like its rain  
  
>she left again just like she came"<p>

The Steeldrivers, \_Heaven Sent\_

\* \* \*

><p>Unconscious for six days, Lieutenant Palmer's condition is listed as stable and her doctors have every expectation of a full recovery. The sternum and rib bones are healing and the heart damage repaired. Cosmetic surgery is pending her regaining consciousness. Until that happens, her doctors decided to keep her in Intensive Care until she woke up on her own and that's what drove Tom Lasky crazy. He wasn't related to her, so they wouldn't let him in to see her.<p>

Late in the evening on day six, Tom Lasky stood at the window and watched Sarah Palmer sleeping. The staff didn't like him standing there, glaring at him every time they walked passed him. Since he wasn't officially inside the ICU, there was really nothing they could do about it. Every evening he came and watched her sleep. About midnight, after the night shift settled in, Tom was about to leave when someone walked up behind him. He could see the reflection in the glass of a man head and shoulders taller.

"Master Chief!" Tom whispered his eyes lighting up with happy surprise. He wasn't a teenager any more so he had to resist the urge to hug the man who'd saved his life. They were both in uniform, he was an officer, and well, oh, the Hell with it, he squeezed the big man as hard as he could. For a brief second he felt those long arms hug him back. Over in a moment, but it helped, it really did. Maybe he wasn't as grown up as he thought.

The Spartan looked down at him skeptically. "How is she, LC?"

"They say she's stable and on the mend. I wish she would wake up, but they want her to come around on her own."

"Let's go in and talk to her."

They won't let us in, because we're not related."

Another crooked smile. "Follow me."

The nursing staff stopped in their tracks at the sight of a 6'7" Master Chief in khakis glittering with a badge and his Master Chief rank pins, including a full set of service ribbons, entering the ICU. Certain times, certain missions, and moments like these required a full uniform. He flipped a badge at them and said gravely, "ONI business."

No one said a word or even moved. Only the medic moved to open the door into Palmer's cubicle. Master Chief, nodded. "Thank you, Petty Officer. We won't be long."

Lasky tried his best Lieutenant Commander's voice, "We'll need privacy, of course."

The Chief pulled him into the room, "Close the curtains."

"Yes, sir!"

"You're the, sir, LC."

"Yes, sir. So do you think it would be okay if I held her hand?"

The Master Chief nodded, "We need to wake her up. There are people who want to talk to her."

Lasky sat down gently on the edge of the bed. It was so good to be close to her again. "Sarah? It's Tom. There's someone here I think you'll be happy to see. I don't think he can stay long, so if you woke up now—"

The Master Chief gazed down at the pair and felt a stab of something he couldn't name. Tom Lasky seemed so easy with her. Almost as if she opened her eyes, they would resume a conversation or a relationship. \_Relationship?\_ That's it. And that's what flared through him, unwelcome and unfamiliar, jealousy. No longer a teenager, her fragile beauty still gave him the feeling she needed protection. Drawn and very pale he knew what this had cost her. Needler rounds hurt like nothing else could.

The Spartan knelt down by the bed and touched her cheek with a fingertip, then allowed the back of his finger to caress her porcelain skin.

"She is beautiful, isn't she Master Chief?"

"Yes," he could not deny it. "Sarah Palmer, I need you to open your eyes."

Her legs shifted under the sheet as if she were moving. Eyes began to shift under delicate lids. Her lips opened over a dry mouth and chapped lips.

"John?" A pale hand reached toward the voice calling her name. A sharp intake of breath and her eyes opened fully. "It is you?"

She'd begun to rise up to him, but he placed a firm hand on her shoulder to hold her still.

"Tom is here, too. Sarah."

Happy tears filled her eyes. "It's so good to see you. You've been talking to me haven't you, Tom? I heard you, even though I was somewhere far away."

"When they let me, yes. I sat and talked to you."

"Oh Tom, I can't believe you're right here with me. And you too, Master Chief."

"Lieutenant Commander Palmer, There are people coming who wish to speak to you... recruit you. That's as much as I can say. I want you to be ready, so you can make the right decision for you and your career. After what happened to you on the last mission, I imagine you're feeling weak, angry, and hating every minute of it. So before you jump at the chance that's about to be offered to you, I want you

to understand just how difficult this life is.

"The life you lead?"

"Yes. Sarah&#128;| I shouldn't even be here."

Palmer took his hand and held it firmly. "You know me too well. I appreciate your concern, Master Chief. I promise to listen to what they say and remember your warning."

"I must go," he softly, tugging his hand away from Palmer's grasp.

"Wait. Please wait." Shaky and weak her emotions rose quickly to the surface.

Lasky rose from the bed, "Yes, please stay."

The sounds of running feet and angry words from the medical staff broke into their conversation. Shouts of \_stop \_and \_come back here\_ followed the two officers who entered.

April Orenski locked the door just as Sully slipped through. Now four grinning officers and no idea how to respond, surround the Master Chief. Sully broke the ice by offering his hand. "It's good to see you, Master Chief."

April responded the same way, "Likewise, sir." And gave his hand a firm shake. "How are the others? Everyone okay?"

"Affirmative. Busy with other missions, but healthy and well."

"Go ahead, you two," Lasky commented with a grin. "We've already shattered protocol with blatant public displays of affection."

That led to Master Chief receiving two more hugs, which was exactly the third and fourth time in his entire life he'd felt anyone's arms around him. Well, there was Kelly. Somehow, this was different.

"I'll grab coffee for everyone and a juice for Sarah. Don't you dare leave, Master Chief." That was Orenski, talking over her shoulder as she hurried to retrieve the drinks. She stopped at the doorway, "And that's an order, sir."

The old friends passed a pleasant hour of catching up on their personal lives, their careers, and their hopes for the future. The Spartan sipped his coffee and thought about his life compared to his. Was this the military life he was missing? Did he even realize until this moment watching their animated conversation and easy camaraderie, that he was missing something?

Fingers wove through his, distracting him the conversation. Sarah's smile caught him so completely off guard that he responded by rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. Cold fingers made him reach over and pull the blanket over her shoulder. Then she caught him again, by taking his hand and laying it between her cheek and the pillow. Brown eyes slipped closed as she fell asleep.

Master Chief felt as if his hand were caught in a vise. A forbidden

temptation of emotions and the soft warm feel of a woman's affection. A glance at Tom Lasky's reaction made him jerk his hand away.

Instead ofâ€¦ well, he didn't know what he expected, Lasky smiled at him. "We're all friends, John."

One of the staff unlocked the door. "Excuse me. Master Chief, three men just entered the hospital lobby. Two of them claim to be ONIâ€¦ One of them is tall like you, sir. Something about it just doesn't make sense. Thought you should know."

Master Chief rose slowly to his feet.

"Are they the people you told us want to talk to Sarah? Seems like a strange time."

"No, it isn't. Change of shift. Night shift is briefing day shift. The ward is busy with talking, and people walking in and out."

"You don't meanâ€¦ theyâ€¦ kidnap her? Why?"

\* \* \*

><p>The Steeldrivers, <em>Heaven Sent<em>

watch?v=coyZduzeXI8

I know our days are heaven sent  
>lord knows I know not where they went<br>shake my head and I wonder how  
>I'll ever get to heaven now<p>

An angel came one winter dawn  
>you shoulda seen what she had on<br>wind was whistlin' like its rain  
>she left again just like she came<p>

I know our days are heaven sent  
>lord knows I know not where they went<br>shake my head and I wonder how  
>I'll ever get to heaven now<p>

I move around a lot these days  
>honky tonks and broad freeways<br>the same thing that I've always done  
>but I'm older now and I get tired some<p>

I know our days are heaven sent  
>lord knows I know not where they went<br>shake my head and I wonder how  
>I'll ever get to heaven now<p>

Those who think they hold the cards  
>I send out my kind regards<br>Those who love to those who care  
>I'll meet you down the road somewhere<p>

I know our days are heaven sent  
>lord knows I know not where they went<br>shake my head and I wonder

how  
>I'll ever get to heaven now<p>

I know our days are heaven sent  
>lord knows I know not where they went<br>shake my head and I wonder  
how  
>I'll ever get to heaven now<p>

I'll ever get to heaven now

#### 14. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 14

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 14, Sniper Breathing

\* \* \*

><p>"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." â€"Helen Keller<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Sarah dozed comfortably, enjoying the sound the voices speaking quietly around her. Her closest and oldest friends were here and it's a welcome treat to the claustrophobic and painful hospital experience. Although, like a memory looking for a way out or an itch she couldn't scratch, something tickled the back of her mind. Just like the fading memory of a bad dream, she couldn't quite grasp it.<p>

Then someone walked into the room and the tone changed completely. Before she could ask or identify it herself, she felt herself lifted from the bed.

"Whyâ€|?"

"Sarah, we need to be quiet just now. We're just taking you to another room."

It wasn't clear what was happening until Tom spoke and she realized the Master Chief had picked her up in his arms.

"I'm hurting you," The Spartan stated, although he could do nothing about it.

"Not at all."

But he could see the line between her eyes deepen and the sheen of sweat on her brow.

"Sarahâ€|"

"Why are theyâ€| why are you moving me?"

"You are not ready for what is coming your way." He had to get her out of here. He knew the Spartan Jun. Do be more precise he knew of him. Those Spartan IIIs were a wild undisciplined bunch. He didn't



want her close enough for him to influence her. And then what? Dictate her career path? Continue to treat her like an invalid. What he wanted, would never be his. Occasionally, in the depths of cryosleep he dreamed about her. The reality of her in his arms, looking up at him... he had to drag his attention away from and focus on getting her to safety.

She couldn't manage to raise her arms high enough to get them around his neck. She had to settle for the lapels of his uniform shirt and tugged.

"Shouldn't I be the judge of that?"

The Chief turned sideways to get through a doorway and down a short flight of stairs. She stopped him in the darkened stairwell, with a word.

"Chief?"

She deserved an explanation. He should tell her something. Say something

"Mister Lasky and I decidedâ€¦" He looked down into her velvet brown eyes and felt himself drawn into the magic of her beauty. She was fearless, courageous and a commissioned officer. She was not a delicate flower or frightened civilian in need of his protection. This woman was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. That he could give her this protection, when he felt she needed it humbled him in a way that confused him.

But the fragility of the body in his arms, lure her scent and parted lips proved too much for even the Master Chief to resist. Her charisma took hold of him, he bent his head toward her.

"Oh, yes please," she whispered against his mouth and caught his cheek with her free hand.

His mouth found hers, igniting a fierce hunger.

When her tongue touched his mouth seeking permission his body jerked in response. The kiss deepened while she stroked his neck with her fingertips. The Spartan tilted her toward his body and opened his mouth to her questing tongue. If her mouth tasted this sweet then what must her cheek taste like? The delicate shell of her ear? He got his answer when his lips touched the fine arch of her ear. That when he discovered the texture of her hair. With his face buried the warmth of her auburn hair, he remembered a conversation from a few years ago.

With his mouth over her ear, he said softly, "John. My name isâ€¦"

He felt her breath hitch and a long sobbing breath flowed out of her.

"I'm causing you more painâ€¦"

"No! \_Dammit\_, yesâ€¦ John, you told me your name." She pulled his head back down to hers and kissed him with all the strength she had left. By the time a door opened below them, the Spartan had her

pushed against the wall and she'd almost pulled herself to a sitting position within the circle of his arm.

"Master Chief! The room is ready. They're already asking why she isn't in her assigned room."

Sarah let her head drop against his chest and her hand slip out from his collar. "That will have to last us awhileâ€|"

He didn't answer her, because he had no idea what to say. He shouldn't even be here, the fact he was in a duty uniform was a breach of protocol for a Spartan because it revealed his face and rank. He hurried down the remainder of the stairs wondering at this remarkable woman who tempted him to do things he'd never done before and feel things for which he had no reference.

Tom opened the door for the Master Chief, to a darkened basement room.

"Here, Chief." Tom pointed to the bed and pulled the sheet back.

When she felt herself land on the bed, she hung on to his shirt. She was acting like a child. Suddenly and for reasons she couldn't name, she was deeply frightened.

"Don't leave."

He touched his forehead to hers. "I cannot stay. I leave you in Tom's care. Sarah," the Spartan's voice turned serious, "he has something to tell you."

"Waitâ€| thank you," she said, tears welling up again. "So much I want to say."

He gave her a long look, "Knowing that you're thinking of me â€" that all of you remember me â€" is a giftâ€| Take care of each other."

He didn't want to leave her. When Tom showed her those dog tags and she needed someone to hold on to, he wanted to be the one she turned too.

"Take care of her."

"Of course. You be careful out here, Master Chief."

"I'll accept that as an order, sir." And he nodded once and left the room without a sound of his passing.

With his eyes on the ragged backpack, Tom tried to give Sarah the privacy she needed to calm down. Behind him he heard Orenski and Sully enter the room.

"Tom? I remember the doctors said something about losing my memories because of the trauma. Is that true?"

Tom found her hand and squeezed it tight.

"I'm sorry, Sarah. I know the Chief's presence was a pleasant distraction. But the fact they weren't the first thing you asked

about."

"They? It's the middle of the night, Tomâ€¦ They'll come by in the morning. Right? My teamâ€¦"

April sat down on the bed next to her and Sully took her other hand, while Tom reached into the backpack. He tried his best to keep the chains from jingling, but his hands were shaking so bad he couldn't. She would know this soundâ€¦

"The missionâ€¦ my boysâ€¦" The groan that rose out of her chest, he never wanted to hear again as long as he lived. He glanced at his friends and he knew they all felt inadequate to the task of getting her through this. There were no real words, no words of comfort to ease this kind of pain. They'd all seen it. They were officers, leaders and trained to make decisions that often led to the difference of life and death. This was just the first time it had happened to one of them.

"Just say it, Tom! Just \_fucking\_ say it."

"You pulled it off, Sarah." He had to force the words out. The time for stalling was over. "The mission was successful. Somehow, they're still investigating; someone sabotaged the PODs and the team who didn't die during the drop died soon after. I'm sorryâ€¦"

Tom held his arms out to her, but she didn't respond. Instead, he lowered his arms and watched her scrub the tears away as her face hardened into a mask. They watched her shoulders square and while she took a deep breath, turned into a different person.

"Sarah?" Tom reached for her, but she was already moving off the bed. She slipped a robe over her shoulders and stuffed her feet into paper slippers. Before she walked out the door, she faced her friends one last time.

"I understand something now. I didn't before. The Master Chief kissed me a few minutes ago. I think he enjoyed itâ€¦ we both did. But now, I know he'll feel guilty for allowing himself that lapse. I love you guys, but there is no time for love in this world we live in. It's just too dangerous."

Her voice broke and Tom tried to get to her, but she stopped him with a hand. "I-I made a vow that night at Corbulo. For a few minutes, I lost sight of it. Not again. Never again. Be safe." Sarah Palmer, a decorated Marine, officer, and Hell Jumper walked out of her hospital room and kept walk until she found him. The door opened on a long hallway. She saw him there watching for her as if he had been waiting all along. Waiting for her to find her way to him.

She swallowed in a dry throat, with her pulse thundering in her ears. She didn't know his name, perhaps she never would. That didn't matter. He could give her what she needed to fulfill her vow. He would show her the way to build herself into a better soldier. She would take it, she would take everything they had to offer and learn the skills and strength required to kill every single one of those fucking alien monsters.

Her hand reached for a nearby wheelchair to steady herself. The hallway seemed very long now, at the end, with unreadable narrow

eyes, he watched her approach like a raptor watches its prey. With one hand stuffed deep in the pockets of his worn Navy dungarees, still as a shadow, he silently observed her approach. She focused on the shiny piece of metal he wove through his fingers. It was a shell casing from a System 99C-S2 Anti-MatÃ©riel sniper rifle. If he were testing her to see if she could make it without falling, then she'd damn well ace the test. There were scars on his shaved head. No, they were tattoos. A fist holding three arrows and she wondered what that represented. Perhaps she would shave her own head as a penance. Her hair was a ridiculous reminder of a young girl foolish enough to take pride in long pretty hair. No more.

Sarah steadied herself and let go of the wheelchair. Her team. She'd lost her boys and it was her fault. She was their leader. What hadn't she checked? What thing hadn't she noticed? The memories were all coming back now. Their mutilated bodies rotting in the sun. The sound of the explosion when she lit their funeral pyre. The stench of the dead covenant bodies. The chatter of the Grunts. The Needler rounds ripping through her armor and igniting her flesh. Sarah tightened her grip on their dog tags until they bit into her skin. By the time, she reached the Spartan, blood dripped from her hands.

He didn't speak, simply stared down at her with dead eyes the color of muddy water.

The young girl inside wanted to scream, to deny, and run away. That girl wanted the Master Chief's attentions and the look of love in Tom's eyes. But Sarah the ODST had pushed that part of herself aside. That girl was quiet now and would not be allowed to express herself again.

The man stood above her, studying her and waiting patiently. He knew he wasn't wrong about her. So when she finally raised her eyes to his, he saw the raw courage, the competitiveness and the fire to win no matter what the cost. Yes, he knew she was the perfect candidate.

"I'm ready," she whispered and then again with a stronger voice, "\_I'm ready to go.\_"

The Spartan held out his arm to her, as a gentleman would a lady. He walked her out of the hospital and into a ground car. She never looked back.

"I'm readyâ€¦"

Spartan, Jun-A266 listened to the conviction in her voice. He believed her. That's why he was here. When she fell asleep with her head against the window, he reached back and tossed a blanket over her.

"Get some rest, little sniper. You have a long journey ahead of you."

## 15. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 15

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 15, Finding the Answers

AN: Thanks to all you readers and the supportive words. For those of you who asked, here is your John and Kelly interlude. What follows is something that would probably never happen. Yet, it's certainly possible and really fun to write.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is the very ecstasy of love:<p>

Whose violent property fore does itself,  
And leads the will to desperate undertakings,  
As oft as any passion under heaven,  
That does afflict our natures."

Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2.1

\* \* \*

><p>Kelly-087 quietly entered the sleeping area set aside for the Spartan teams. Normally, they would be in Cryosleep, but the mission tempo prevented the time it took for all of them to process through sleeping and waking. So they caught some rack time when they could and enjoyed the small luxuries usually denied them, like bathrooms, real food and hot showers.<p>

Searching through the gloom, Kelly's sharp eyes made out the large figure of John-117. She doubted he was asleep. Too many years of forced Cryosleep left them without the ability to fall asleep easily on their own. The lights were always too bright and the usual normal ship noises a distraction. Just lying in a bed felt strange and often uncomfortable.

Wanting to talk, Kelly made her way to him noticing there were no other Spartan's present in the room. Good, she thought. He hadn't been the same since his "secret mission" to speak to Sarah Palmer. Although she'd run interference for him while he was gone. She hadn't agreed with his reasons for leaving. In fact, they had done something they'd never done before. They'd actually fought about it. At least that's how a crewmember who overheard their raised voices, explained it to her.

Fighting was killing Covenant soldiers. Spartans never fought among themselves. Their words left a bad feeling and a sickness in her stomach, which alternated between nausea and cramps. Maybe she should apologize. Instead of waking him, she watched him sleep and wondered about Sarah Palmer. Smart, sophisticated, and beautiful, she had just about everything Kelly felt she lacked.

\* \* \*

><p>Stretched out on his stomach, with his head buried under a pillow he knew it was her. Her quiet footsteps stirred him to wakefulness. Soon, and he waited for it, counting her steps, he'd catch her scent. There it was nothing flowery or girly as she might call it. Just the familiar and comforting smell of her soap-clean body. The ends of her dark brown hair made a brushing sound as they moved over

shoulders.<p>

She should be sleeping. As leader of Blue Team, he could order her to bed. Ordering Kelly rarely worked, though. He imagined her gray-blue eyes gazing at him while pretending to sleep.

"Rabbit, you worry too much." John commented his head still buried under the pillow and his voice rumbling and sleepy.

Kelly shook her head, he knew her so well. With a sigh of resignation, that made John smile, Kelly flopped down on the deck next the head of his bed. Their angry parting had left its mark on him as well. Always, protective of her, in the middle of fighting their way across a ruined field to break into a military compound the Covenant occupied, it had suddenly dawned on him that he would do anything to keep her safe and alive. While that were also true of civilians, Marines, and his fellow Spartans, John realized this was differentâ€|she was different. For this lapse in attention, he earned a painful blow from a Kig-Yar energy weapon. While he lay on the ground trying to catch his breath, he had a moment's epiphany.

\_Females were a dangerous distraction.\_

There, that settled it. He rolled himself to his feet and ran after Spartan-087.

\* \* \*

><p>"I suppose you have a nickname for her too?" Well, that was a stupid and childish comment. <em>Just brilliant, Kelly<em>. Well, he knew that about her too. She always came to him when she was out of sorts, or unsure. He'd always been her big brother, her bulwark against the terrors of their early years of conscription. And there'd been Samuel and the horrible hours after they knew he died sacrificing himself so the two of them could escape. Now she felt even worse.

"That was unworthy of me. I apologize, for fighting with you, for that comment, for questioning your judgment, for being a distractionâ€|Good night, John."

Before she walked away, he pulled the pillow off his head and grabbed her hand. With a flick of his wrist, she found herself across his lap with her back against the wall.

"You behave like a child."

She stiffened, pulled her legs under her, and tried to get off the bed. "I'm very tired of you referring to me as a child."

Then to her further annoyance, he turned his face away.

"Kelly," he said her name so seriously that she instantly relaxed and alerted to his behavior.

While she allowed him time to find the words, Kelly noticed the hem of his white t-shirt bunched up around his waist, and the soft pants stretched low across his hips. His firm abdominal muscles and the soft-looking brown hair it revealed made her forget to

breathe.

\_Handsome.\_

The word skipped like a stone over water through her normally disciplined mind and her hand followed her thought up his forearm to the spot where the soft white cotton stretched over his thick bicep.

Was it soft, she wondered?

"I tried to make a decision for her that was not mine to make."

"You tried to protect her," she corrected. Had Sarah Palmer even noticed and appreciated the vulnerable handsome man who allowed herself this close to the skin that begged her to touch it with her fingertips.

Soft or coarse?

There was a string right there, thicker than a string actually, over that short curly hair. Her logical mind reminded her that a scientific conclusion could not be drawn unless she touched more of it.

What if she pulled on the string?

No, she decided. That might be too personal. She picked a different question to mull over while she waited for John to speak. Was the exposed skin over his muscular stomach softer than the skin on his bicep or his cheek? That might not be too personal to touch. What she really wanted was to give in to the growing need to pull him against her body and hold him to her with all her strength. Instead, Kelly settled for allowing her head fall against his shoulder.

She could smell him now. Kelly inhaled deeply dragging the scent of the man before her into her body. This man lived locked inside the armor they both wore. But this was also the man who smelled of sweat, sleep warmed skin and secret things she'd never noticed before.

"What are you staring at, Rabbit? The Spartan asked tilting her face up.

"Strictly speaking I was not staring."

He narrowed his eyes and tried to ignore the building heat, "What do you call it?"

Kelly swallowed hard and for the first time found it difficult to look into his eyes. She knew him, knew his sadness, and his sense of isolation. As Spartans, they all shared those feelings. But he shared them with her and that made all the difference.

While they stared at each other, John took her hand and pressed her palm against his belly.

"Is this what you wanted?"

It was softer. A lot softer than the skin on his arm. His muscles

contracted under her spread her fingers. She heard the sharp intake of breath and saw his eyes flash.

"Almost. I have a question."

"Only one?" he asked leaning toward her and allowing his hands to land on her hipbones.

"You kissed her."

"That's not a question," his thumbs slid under the hem of her shirt.

"Did you kiss her?"

His eyes did that funny thing again and darted away.

Kelly pulled him back to her, "It's okay. But I want to knowâ€¦"

"What do you want to know, Kelly?"

He might sound a little angry, but she could tell he was having the same trouble breathing. Her palm moved up his torso to cover his heart. His skin was so warm and his pounding heart pulsed against her hand. Her other hand ghosted over his lips. No, she decided, it was not okay that he kissed that other woman.

Before she could tell him so, he grabbed her face in his hands. "This is different. Don't you understand?" He shook her. "If I kissed you, if I laid down with you on this bedâ€¦ then lost youâ€¦"

"John, you worry too much." Kelly released her hold on him, pulled her shirt off, and dropped it to the floor. She hadn't intended to go further than removing her shirt, but John had other ideas and the sports bra she wore beneath came apart in his hands. This was very different from the thousand times they'd changed in the same locker room or showered in open stalls.

The air caressing her skin made her shiver.

"My Kelly?" John said softly, as a question, and as though the words had only just come to him. "There is nothing in my life, which I may call my own. Except you."

She couldn't answer because nothing worked, not her arms or her legs or her the part of her brain that connected to her mouth. There is only the growing flame burning deep in her belly and a quiet dark world where only she and John existed. Kelly could only watch while John reached forward and rubbed his thumb over one of her hardened nipples. She could only bow her head over his hand and crush his fingers against her breast.

"Are you ready to ask the second question?"

"You're teasing me."

"No. I am taking every step of these first-times with you, Kelly. What do you need from me?"



"I-I noticedâ€¦ I guess because you sat up and your clothes twisted and I wonderedâ€¦" A blush crept into her cheeks and it embarrassed her because it once again reminded her that just often she acted childishly.

"John?"

With his fingers carded into her hair, he turned her face up.

"Come here."

Her first kiss felt like all the good things in her life wrapped up in the touch John's mouth to hers. She'd had no idea. She could taste him on her lips. Then his tongue swept across hers and she came up on her knees and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and head.

"I didn't knowâ€¦"

"Shhh," he cautioned and pulled her head back down. The kiss deepened between them increasing in intensity as they discovered its secrets. Finally, Kelly gasped softly and raised her head. It was at that moment John discovered the nipples he swore were digging into his skin were now level with his mouth.

Women were a dangerous distraction.

First, he used his tongue to make the same movement as his thumb. Kelly's groan of surprise made him bolder and he kissed the firm peaks, giving each one its share of attention. One fit perfectly in his hand. The other fit perfectly in his mouth. How was this possible?

When he stopped, she was digging her nails into his shoulders and moving rhythmically against him. Perhaps he shouldn't stop. With an arm wrapped around her waist, John bent his head and continued suckling her breasts. With each encouragement, he sucked harder until finally he dragged his teeth across the taut flesh.

He shouldn't be doing this. They should both be asleep. Then why had he made sure they would be alone and taken a shower and shaved.

Anger stirred in him. Why did she affect him this way, when no one else in his life ever had? Sarah was a distant memory to the woman arching herself against him, squeezing his shoulders with her considerable strength. She hummed her pleasure to him and the anger replaced by the need to take, to control and own.

John closed his teeth over her right breast.

When she cried out, something happened that took them both by surprise. Something inside Kelly seemed to break. She nearly screamed his name, but he managed to push her face into his neck before her shout brought every Spartan and Marine on the ship in here. Literally rippling in his arms, he held her tight until she recovered.

Kelly allowed herself to fall against him until there were kneeling on the bed with their knees touching. She raised her eyes to his. Flushed, her lips swollen with kisses, she was beautiful and wild. A large red bruise on her chest glowed in the dim light.

"Kelly," he called her name, reaching for her.

"Did you touch her likeâ€|?"

"What?"

"Did youâ€|"

With a fury he couldn't control, John rose up on his knees and ripped the cord holding his pants closed. When he grabbed her hand, her eyes widened. Was that fear he saw in her eyes?

\_Good.\_

She'd gone too far. He was genuinely angry with her now.

\_"She's\_ not here. \_She\_ will never be here. \_She\_ will neverâ€|\_Kelly\_."

He forced her hand over his erection. When her fingers surrounded him, sticking to his flesh and grabbing at a part of him no one had ever touched, the anger dissipated and only grinding desire burned. Driving him to action with a primal need no indoctrination in the universe could suppress.

"Do you have your answer \_now\_?"

## 16. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 16

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 16, Unknown Fate

\* \* \*

><p>"The true adventurer goes forth aimless and uncalculating to meet and greet unknown fate." â€"O. Henry<p>

\* \* \*

><p>While the two Spartans, John and Kelly stared each other down and contemplated their choices. Another woman in a place with no windows, cold concrete walls and faceless people in surgical masks also fought her anxieties and contemplated her choices.<p>

Jun had brought her as far as the security gate. Before she could say goodbye or thank him the guards escorted her away. It wasn't as if they'd made friends. The man had stayed silent through most of their trip. Yet, she felt connected to him as if he might be her last link with something. The real world. That couldn't be it, because he certainly didn't live in the real world, anymore than the other Spartans she knew.

Once inside, the only words she heard came from another faceless tech who told her to strip and put the gown, he thrust at her, on backwards. No jewelry, no hair clips no nothing, he'd mumbled. We'll come for you when we're ready. Wait here. Then he'd walked out the door.

The metaphor of passing through from one place to another with nothing from the old life was not lost on her. Like a nun removing her secular clothes in preparation to put on a garment of faith or a princess passing from her country of birth to the country of her marriage, Sarah Palmer thoughtfully removed her clothes and donned the paper gown. Hardly the dress of a princess, she thought.

An hour went by and then another, with her toes curled away from the icy floor as she paced. She was so cold she imagined the dark concrete walls were rimmed with ice. Her body began to shake with it.

Was she doing the right thing? She was an ODS and a Master Sniper. Didn't she have all the skills needed to be the best of the best? With her arms wrapped around herself she stopped pacing when she remembered she had no real idea of what they planned to do to her. She would be come taller, obviously. But how would that happen? Stronger, yes. What was the process? How long would it take?

Finally, when she was thirsty, hungry and her bladder about to burst they came and got her. When she asked to go to the bathroom a technician explained he would have to watch her urinate. They would test her urine and there must be no mishap. So she tried to pee with a man watching. To make herself relax she thought about the time her ODS team had formed a ring around her so she could have a little privacy. The jokes they cracked kept her laughing, but also made it nearly impossible to empty her bladder. It wasn't until they threatened to peak that she finally finished.

Without speaking they indicated for her to lie down the table. It might as well have been a block of ice. They covered her face and eyes with a mask and suddenly Sarah wanted to be anywhere else but blind, naked, freezing and sucking air that didn't exist. They assured her there was plenty air coming through the mask. But she couldn't breath. They told her it had to cover her eyes to protect them. She didn't believe them. They strapped her down.

"Sarah please relax. We can't proceed until you do."

Interesting that no one used her rank.

A different technician leaned close to her ear and they could wait until the last minute to put the mask over her face. Then he took her hand, "Hey, Hell Jumper," The technician whispered. "I know you ain't really scared. Don't let these idiots make you think otherwise." Fingers squeezed hers, "Semper Fi, Marine. Right? Come on, LC. Gimme a squeeze."

But she could barely focus on his voice because the voices around her continued to rise in frustration and impatience, "Her blood pressure and pulse are rising. We should stop the procedure."

"Nonsense, she's young and strong." The doctor jerked his wrist out of his sleeve to check his watch. "I have a lunch meeting in two hours. Let's begin."

Something cold and sharp touched her arm. She jerked so hard the strap broke and the injection site bled. A technician hurried over to

staunch the flow of blood. Someone else tried to retie her arm. She watched her own blood arch across the room when she pulled the mask off with her free hand.

It took two technician's to tie her back down.

\_I am Hell Jumper. Feet First into Hellâ€| Feet firstâ€| Into Hellâ€| ODST! ODST! ODST!\_

"Doctor, she cannot sustain this level of stress. Lactic acid levels are rising. She's hyperventilating. Blood pressure is 280 over 160, and pulse 130. She could stroke. I insist we stop the procedure."

The doctor spoke again, his voice arrogant and thin with disgust. "How dare you question me? How would you like to be back working in a trauma center picking Needler rounds out of Marines?"

Over the sounds of shouting, and monitor alarms Sarah heard the sound of a door opening and the crash when it hit the wall. Had someone really just kicked that door open?

"Get the fuck out." A male voice cut through all the sound in the room and everything went silent.

Now, she could hear the thundering beat of her heart. She listened for the voice again. Was it John?

"Listen here. I don't care \_which one\_ you are, but Spartans are strictly forbidden here." That was the doctor's voice.

"If you knew me, you'd know I don't follow rules very well. Now, I'll say it one more time and believe me when I tell you I'm not always so polite. Get out of this room and give me a moment with her."

Straining to hear the shuffle of feet, Sarah heard the door close again.

"Sarah Palmer? Do you recognize the sound of my voice? Squeeze my fingers. Good. Be still and I will remove your restraints. I have someone here with me I want you to meet."

The mask is pulled from her face, while a second pair of hands released the belts around her ankles and wrists. Gasping and coughing someone helped her sit up and draped a robe over her shoulders.

"Here." An accented female voice handed her a box of tissues.

"Thank you. I-Iâ€|"

"You don't have to explain. We've all been through it and with the exception of those crazy Spartan IIs we've all been just as scared as you are right now."

She would have laughed if she weren't shaking so hard with reaction. Why was she so frightened?

"What if I'm not strong enoughâ€|"

"Bullshit." The feminine voice spat and moved into Sarah's line of sight. A strikingly powerful young woman, with short black hair and icy blue eyes, stuck her hand out to Sarah.

"Name's Kat. You're plenty strong, or we wouldn't have sought you out. You're just not ready to let go."

Jun tugged on her hand to get her attention, "If it's strength you want, you're in the right place. If you want the tools to kill those Covie bastards you're in the right place. Sarah, you'll be no more isolated than when you were runnin' all those covert missions with your ODST team."

Kat spoke again, "You'll count on your team, same as you did before. We need you Sarah. There's work waiting to be done and you're just the person to do it." She grinned up at Jun. "Anyway, this one needs work on his sniper skills."

"Will you join us, Sarah Palmer?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. But she did pick up the mask and relaxed back down on the table.

Kat leaned over her and grinned again. Sarah suddenly realized that the only thing truly frightening in this room was that grin. It was feral and anything but friendly.

"Well, see you on the other side, Spartan."

Kat was right. She didn't want to let go. Let go of what? Would she become as scared and rough as those two, or as haunted as John? She was an officer and would remain one. The leadership responsibilities would not go away, in fact they could and probably would be even more demanding.

As her blood began to warm and flow back into her hands and feet, she breathed through her anxieties. The only thing she was truly leaving behind were what she perceived as weakness and the inability to protect her troops. She thought of John and the other Spartan's she'd met at Corbulo so long ago. They protected each other with a fierce pride she'd only witnessed among ODST.

Gradually, Sarah's blood pressure came down. Outside the treatment room the technician's continued to monitor her. When she'd nearly fallen asleep, Jun nudged the doctor.

"She's ready now."

"Oh, thank you \_Doctor Spartan.\_ I'll take that under advisement. Now, there's the door."

Inside the treatment room, Sarah Palmer breathed herself into relaxing. Sniper breathing, watch the target, the wind, the range and the altitude. It was all a matter of vectors and trajectories. Breathe in. Listen and wait for the bottom of your heartbeat, squeeze the trigger. Exhale. Breath in...

She thought about the times John had been so kind to her. How he carried her aboard the pelican when they escaped from Circinius IV.

She thought about her friends and Tom, especially Tom. She hoped she never had to choose between the two of them. But she never would because, if there was one thing she was leaving behind it was love and all that it meant.

The chemicals flowed into her bloodstream like a bolt of molten electricity and she felt like screaming. Instead, Sarah imagined turning her face into John's shoulder while he pressed her head against his heart.

\_John, thank you for being here with me.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Kelly's eyes went wide and her face flushed. Yes, perhaps she had found her answer. This wasn't flirting or pretending to be adults by stealing an embrace or watching each other in the shower and wondering. The expression on John's face and the pulsing organ in her hand is where the wondering ended.<p>

An apology died on her lips. This was not the time. Without letting go of him she pushed down her pants. Rising up on her knees and pressed herself against him. She released him only to capture him between her thighs. John shuddered when the driving need of the chaos between his legs slid through the wet heat of the desire waiting for him.

Her hips moved forward sliding along the length of John's erection. The effect took them both by surprise. The second time she moved, John controlled her hips.

It wasn't as if they didn't know. Biology classes taught them the workings of the human body. They just didn't know about the aching desire and overwhelming need to to own and connect. The connection of their youthful skin over taut muscle and the heat of their bodies as they clung to each other. John slipped his hand between her legs and found the small bundle of nerves. As he began to move his fingers, he whispered softly against her cheek, "Show me, Kelly."

Kelly joined her hand with his and instinct taught her how to move her fingers, how much pressure, when and for how long. The slow almost hesitant rocking motion became more frantic as tension built. In a blinding crash of nerves exploding and the pulse and expanding of her woman's body, she sank her teeth into John's shoulder and rode out her orgasm within the haven of his embrace.

Both of them a little shocked at the intimacy of what just happened, it was a few minutes before Kelly could raise her eyes to his. She framed his face in her hands and kissed his cheeks, his mouth and his eyes. "Make me yours, John. Just as I have always been."

She watched him remove the remainder of his clothes, while she pushed her own pants and briefs off. John thought about how odd it was to be stared at this way. Hidden within his armor, he never cared about anyone staring at him. This was new, she was appraising his body. Her eyes followed the paths of his muscular frame. He thought of his body only in terms of a tool. A question came unbidden and took him by surprise, did she like what she saw? So many scars...

His hesitancy ended when she playfully wrapped her legs around his

hips from the bed. he followed her down. Everything fit together, with their hips perfectly aligned and their mouths pressed together, breathing into one another. The fit of her breast in her hands. She was all soft and sweet and every moment treated him to a new sensation.

In a moment of kissing, Kelly moved restlessly, opening her legs and lifted her hips up to John. He felt himself fall into her and the circle was complete. Before he lost control, because he could feel it building. Something, which had nothing to do with soft or sweet, was taking him over. This final moment before he lost the ability to speak, he said. "My beautiful Kelly. If this is what love is, then that is what Iâ€¦"

Kelly felt like crying or laughing, she wasn't sure which. She'd always relied on her instincts. This instincts rising up in her was different and new. It burned her with its intensity and softened her heart. There was nothing more in this world than to hold him within and offer herself to this man who held her so completely with his body. With her eyes locked into his, she tilted her hips and wrapped long strong legs around him.

In his whole life he'd never held something in his arms, that wasn't about death and destruction. In a world where almost everything around him was smaller and weaker and breakable, there was the strength and resiliency of the woman beneath him. So when he felt as if he were falling and losing control he knew she could keep him safe in the circle of her body.

Kelly whispered his name, singing of her love and desire. John moved over her, dancing with the beauty in his arms.

"It's happeningâ€¦ againâ€¦ Johnâ€¦"

Worried that he was hurting her he softened his hold on her and slowed his movements. But she had other needs.

"No!" She raised herself up to him. "Keep moving. I needâ€¦ harder."

Demanding movement with each thrust of her hips. John increased his tempo and watched her face change, felt her body burn with heat. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"\_Kelly?"\_

She was close and so was he. Her orgasm triggered his, pulling him deep inside her. it was like dying, like falling off a cliff. Feeling so strongly about someone that you would happily do both those things if they asked.

White heat flashed through him, blinding him to everything but the lasered itself to the point of their joining. Greedy muscles pulsed and pulled, draining him. A lifetime of containing emotion, compartmentalizing and doing as you were told, evaporated in the moment his body released into his woman.

\* \* \*

><p>Alone in a dark room, Lieutenant Commander Sarah Palmer opened

her eyes and learned a new definition for agony.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>When he could let her go, he tucked her into the bed next to his. He didn't want to let her go. The need for her rose again, like a siren's song of desire along his nerves. After laying her clothes where she could get to them in the morning, John slipped into his own bed. As the other Spartans filled in, Kelly reached across and playfully touched the end of his nose.<p>

"I think we found the right answer," she said, with her usual sass. They watched each other fall asleep, neither wanting to be the first to give in to the drowsy sweetness of their fatigue.

## 17. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 17

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 17, The Only Easy Day Was Yesterday

AN: A big thank you and Spartan smiles to Convict626 for assistance with this chapter.

\* \* \*

><p>"Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world. But, the Marines don't have that problem."<p>

â€• Ronald Reagan

\* \* \*

><p>Torrential rain and gale force winds? Turn up your collar and put your back to it. Is the weather bad enough to ground the Pelicans? They only had to get you and no promises about a ride home. The only easy day was yesterday, Marine. No one made you volunteer, so suck it up, Marine. Wanna stay home with Mommy and Daddy until your planet is glassed and you're left to rot, no longer protected from the sun by an atmosphere? Hell, if you're that brave you should be in the Marines. So get to it! There's work to do, Marine.<p>

Tugging on her zipper, Captain April Orenski clamped her Boonie hat over her close-cropped hair, took a breath, and put on her command face. After carefully bundling her PADD, radio, and the classified information into an inside pocket of her pack she headed outside to brief the Marines. She wished there was good news, but there was nothing, only the endless rain, the emptiness of this grassy plain, and a town ten miles away.

Carefully walking down the rain-slicked ramp of the doomed Pelican, she signaled the platoon sergeant to call the Marines to attention. They weren't her Marines and she wasn't even supposed to be here. She'd only volunteered to observe the pilot for his annual training evaluation to catch a ride to her next duty assignment. Well, it was SNAFU for that plan and wasn't that normally the way things turned out? So now, she's a field officer again and it's a ten-mile forced march in mud up to their arse holes.



Behind them lay the remains of the Pelican that brought them here. A random lightning strike fried the aircraft's hydraulics. The pilot, may he rest in the paradise of his choice, died on impact. Not before, he'd gotten them safely on the ground. Nothing like a controlled crash to keep the adrenaline pumping. The Marines had been able to jump out the back without injury and most of their equipment. Once the plane was secure they'd set up a small bivouac under the one of the Pelican's undamaged wings.

Now she's the ranking officer of this long-range recon mission. The kind so far out you couldn't just walk home. Their LT had been more than pleased to brief her on the mission and step back to give her command. Yeah, kid. That's not how this worked. She already had a nice list of jobs for him.

Until the weather cleared, they were alone on this planet. Alone, unless the Covies decided to come back and glass the place. The mission? Get to the town, grab the Intel, any survivors, and get out. There were rumors of injured Spartans, but those were never substantiated. Until you actually saw one you could never be sure.

Better to offer the carrot first. "\_Maaarines!\_ Anyone want to get out of this rain?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" They shouted in unison breaking formation by shouting when they'd just been ordered to the position of attention.

Orenski observed their behavior. They were getting restless, time to move out. "Ten miles due north lies a town. We have five hours before sundown and ten miles to walk. You have fifteen minutes of those five hours to break camp. Last one back in formation cooks dinner when we get there. Turn \_to!\_"

While they marched across the desolate landscape, Captain Orenski tried again to reach Command. The orders the LT received before the crash were too stale now. It was imperative she knew what was going on above their heads. Otherwise, there might be more of a party at this little town than she and her men could reasonably host. And that wouldn't be good. Always protective of her troops, Captain Orenski thrived best on information. You'd never see this anxiety in her face, only her second in command knew and understood this inner battle. But he wasn't here. If he were, she'd assign him to the LT, just to keep the young man in line.

While they walked, Orenski watched the lightning flashing against the bloated storm clouds. Mud sucked at their boots and the endless rain ignored the rain ponchos and found its way inside their uniforms. If they didn't get out of this storm before that electrical storm caught them out in the open, they'd fry just like the Pelican.

Halfway to the town, without a single grumble from the Marines, her radio came to life. All heads turned toward her.

\_Cadet Orenski. \_

Although she managed not to gasp, she closed her eyes and remembered the voice, the tone of command and the simple code that identified the caller.

She tapped the button to indicate she heard and understood. A long silence before they continued caller continued, \_Continue radio silence. Hunters at your twelve, four miles. Blue protecting orbital weapons. Hold your ground, Marine...\_

The garbled comm ended and she shook the radio in frustration. She knew what to do and began shouting orders before she secured the radio. "Blain and Snyder! Arm those M41s." Goddamn rain she cursed to herself. At least it would knock down the smoke trail and she'd keep them moving before any of those bastards could triangulate on them. Whatever awaited them her team they would get it cleared. "James! Spot for them. You're looking for two Hunters. Clear 'em before we get to town. Understood?"

"Aye, ma'am!"

"What the hell are you the rest of you looking at? Keep moving!"

Another three miles of walking through the wet and desolate landscape brought the night. Now it's dark and the only sounds are the rain and the squelching sound of their boots in the mud. The rain lessened to a downpour and the winds died down enough allow some visibility. Thunder still rumbled in the distance and the lightning had moved over the mountains. Sometimes that was the only break a Marine could expect. Now they could see the ghostly outline of the town in the distance.

After creeping into a decent cover of high scrub and a burned out building. Orenski had them prepare their weapons and James put the spotting scope to use without being asked. Good man.

"Don't be shy, James." She said clapping her hand on his shoulder, he gave her a nod and went back to his spotting scope. Orenski flipped his collar up to keep the rain off his neck.

Snyder and Blain took position aiming down the scopes of their M41s. They'll wait for the spotter, but she knows if the target appeared in their scope, they won't hesitate to fire.

Five minutes of waiting and James' calm clear voice echoed through their comm units. "Two Mgalekgolo. 10 o'clock. My position. Wind calm. Elevation 1% Distance 2.5 miles. Horizontal distance 1 mile."

"We seem 'em, Cap'. They're just standing there. But ma'am, my daddy-bag tells me something ain't right."

She checked the scanner again. Nothing but those two Hunters. She heard the Marine's warning, but it's time to jump in the pool. "Get tactical, gentlemen and fire when ready!"

The hiss and muted flash of the missile launch grabbed everyone's attention. She didn't doubt their ability, but Orenski could not ignore Blain's warning. A Marine who expected to stay alive listened to their instincts. And that well-honed instinct kept her scanning the horizon behind her men's position.

So it didn't surprise when banshees roared to life bearing down on

their position. Illuminated from behind by the lights of the battle units her men are effectively blinded when they turned to defend themselves.

"Get to cover!" The squad leaders shouted in unison.

Followed up by their Captain's order, "James, Snyder, Blain, you stay on those Hunters until they're a pile of goo."

A quick counted yielded six banshees and now fuck-it-all-to-hell-and-back there could be more. Of course, there would be more. Right now, they needed an advantage and she knew just what to do. Captain Orenski grabbed her sniper specialist and shouted into his ear. He looked up at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Make it happen!" She responded in to his startled face.

Whatever time they had to move into position ran out. Trusting her men not to shoot her while they fired on the banshees, Orenski waited patiently. The opportunity presented itself when one of the banshee's turned broadside. Hoping the bullet reached the Grunt before she did, the thing obligingly died when its head exploded shooting thick purple blood in all directions just as she reached the cockpit.

"Get out'a my way, freak," she kicked the dead Grunt out of the pilot's seat and took his place. Nearly gagging on the smell that permeated the seat, she reminded herself to buy that sniper a beer, no a six-pack or a bottle of good scotch.

"Anyone want to play?" Captain Orenski called into her mic.

That invitation yielded a chorus of, "Hooyah and get me one too, Snipe!"

"Rules! You only get a banshee if you kill the freak inside. Rifle team and shaper shooters old your position and watch for Elites and try to remember we're out here."

Then some good news. "Hunters down. Repeat Hunters down!"

Good job, boys, Orenski breathed in relief while she brought the banshee around behind the small squad of Covies. Instead of attacking directly, she kept her head down and did a quick recon. Sure enough, a squad of Jackals and five Elites ran behind the banshees.

Five banshees dropped into formation next to her and five Marines grinned at her, pumping the air with their fists. Good, this is more than enough to pull down those Jackals. They'd have to be careful with those Elites. They were perfectly capable of taking the banshees away from them, just as they'd done with the Grunts. They'd practiced this exact scenario many times. The Marines called it playing cowboys and Indians. She had no idea what that meant, but the tactic usually worked.

"Jackals first! Then we'll mow down those Elites. Snyder and Blain grab James and flank these Elites. Load those rockets. As many as you can carry. Then back us up. If you shoot one hair on my pretty head, I'll eat your balls with Habanero Sauce."

Three Banshee's broke left and the other three broke right. Lining up on the Covies, they put them between them and started firing. In the

center of the field, they passed each other and turned. Only one Jackal remained standing and he was running for cover. Orenski watched the other female Marine, turn her banshee on its tail head and straight for the fleeing Jackal. It turned once to see its attacker, but it never had time to scream before she'd plowed the thing head on, spreading its guts through the mud.

Orenski shook her head. The woman's name might be Holly, but everyone called her The Hammer. Seemed fitting.

She signaled for her squad to form up and shouted for a Sitrep. Good, she allowed herself a moment to relax; her sergeants reported everyone was okay. Then in the distance, she saw a glimmer of something she'd seen once or twice before. It took her exactly five seconds to recognize the camouflaged Elite. It might have been almost twenty years ago but she remembered from Corbulo Academy. Moving quickly toward their position, the rain reflected its shape for anyone who knew what they were looking for.

"Camouflaged Elite, headed this way. You know the drill."

Along her line of sight between her platoon and the quickly moving Elite Holly had stopped her Banshee and stepped out.

Orenski slapped her comm unit open, "Corporal Brown get back in your vehicle!"

Her squad leader was also shouting at her to get back on formation.

"Ma'am there's something out there. I'll take care of it."

"Get. Back. Here. \_Now.\_"

The Elite had seen the corporal and headed straight for her. Captain Orenski gunned the engine and set it on a course straight for the Elite. "Fucking hinge head, welcome to your last day in this world," Orenski growled. One of the other Banshees raced to flank the Elite and draw its fire.

Heading straight for it, Orenski was gratified to see Corporal Brown heading toward the relative safety of the other Marines. Cranking the engine up another notch, she aimed herself at the Elite while it was distracted.

Fifty feet, Forty feet, it still hadn't seen her. Her finger steady on the trigger. His shield is was down, thanks to the other Marines. The thing roared its fury and shook its fists in the air.

She'd hang that light sword and his ugly red skull behind her desk.

Fifteen feet and she began firing.

It dropped to its knees just as she passed him and she maneuvered into position to make a second pass.

"I'll finish him off, ma'am," another Marine, called out. Good enough she thought, and banked the banshee hard to the right. Light shimmered in her peripheral vision. Lightening? It'll be good to get

out of this rain. She heard a scream in the distance and the sound of shouting.

The Elite leapt, slicing the blade through the air with the last of his strength. Her head turned toward the sound of shouting kept the Elite from slicing off her head. She ducked when the blade glanced off the Banshee's cowling. Rain slicked and out of control, the light saber flashed toward her. With a last effort to avoid the blow, she threw up her arms. A hard tug on her arm caused her to lose control of the craft. Something warm is leaking on her arm and she watched hypnotized as the rain washed it away. The Banshee spiraled, the nose caught in the thick mud, broke into pieces, and scattered across the mud.

Their medic is running before anyone thought to call for help. As he runs, he counts five other downed Marines. The mud makes going slow and once he trips over a fallen Grunt. A plasma blast floats past him and he tries to speed up. He turns to see another one heading straight for him. He dodges, but not before it hit him and knocked him to the ground. Grabbing for his pack, the medic began to crawl toward her. Another blast, and he flattens himself to the mud. Once it dissipates, he continues crawling toward the Captain. The blood in his eyes obscures his vision but reaching out with his hands her, face down in a trench of water dredged up by the battle.

"One of you find her fucking arm!" His consciousness fading, the medic shouted with the last of his strength, before falling over her body to protect her from incoming fire.

The LT reached them first and working quickly to clear the mud and water out of her mouth and throat. One of the Marines turned her on her side. Another placed a tourniquet on her what was left of her arm.

Two of the marines came back carrying Corporal Brown. Although blood pumped steadily from a chest wound, she was still conscious. When she saw the Captain, she fought the Marines, yelling at them to put her down.

"I'm done forâ€¦ save that medgel for her. Fucking Jackal gutted me before the Elite even got close. She couldn't know thatâ€¦ damn you Cap' why'd you do that?" The corporal dropped to her knees. "Why'd you try to save me? I'm just aâ€¦" She made a small sound and fell to the ground. They caught her and eased her down to the muddy ground. One of them covered her to keep the rain off her face.

"Love you, guys," she said choking on the blood filling her mouth. "Don't leave me hereâ€¦"

The medic woke, rolled to his side, and reached out to check on the Captain. With his last breath he shouted instructions, "Captain's breathing on her own. Get that arm on ice or something cold, NOW!"

The last thing he saw before his eyes dimmed were lights in the sky.

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

CHAPTER: 18

AN: Short, sweet and most assuredly FLUFFY! Thank you for all the follows and favs, it means a lot to know someone is out there reading my little story.

\* \* \*

><p>"How lucky am I to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard." â€"Winnie the Pooh<p>

\* \* \*

><p>A disciplined Spartan never allowed himself to enjoy the soft down of a woman's hair by carding his fingers through the short strands. A professional soldier is never distracted by the strength of an embrace or the natural perfume of a woman's body. Forever etched into his heart, in spite of his training and indoctrination, are the fragrance, and taste of her sweet arousal. The salty tang of her sweat and the way her muscles embraced him and trapped him inside her body.<p>

A Spartan must never waver in resolution or fall back, yet he failed on all those points because the woman in his arms is Kelly. In ten minutes, he would leave her to join the Pillar of Autumn. Kelly had her orders, and there was every possibility they would never see each other again.

Although they'd managed to stay close, many of their Spartan brothers and sisters died over the endless decades of this war. If he could just hold her long enough he could keep her safe, imbue her with some of his strength. Although she had strength enough of her own, she clung to him, and he buried his face in her neck to hide what he should not feel.

"I cannot let you go," he growled forcing the emotions down deep.

"I know. John, when our time comesâ€" I wish we could go together."

"Yes," he almost choked over the word, but he meant it. They would go together. That he might live without her in his world was unacceptable.

They'd made love again on their last night together. Kelly took control of him and brought him to an orgasm to quickly he helplessly groaned her name with his hands gripping her so hard bruises in the shape of his fingers glowed red and painful on her shoulders and arms. She laughed them off and pulled him down over her. They deliberately hurt each other, trying to embed the other's essence into their flesh and prove their love. John said it first after he curled himself around her, sheathed inside her with his body still trembling with his release.

"I love you, Kelly. I can't. We can't, but I do."

The departure announcement shattered their moment, pulling John back from his memories of their last night together. When John refused to

release her, Kelly, always the strong one began to back away. She held his eyes, stepping slowly away. He watched the tears dry on her pale cheeks, as she changed into a determined and emotionless Spartan. At that moment, he knew he would never feel this way again. He wouldn't allow it. This was too hard. No, never again, he vowed to himself.

"I love you, John," she said softly as their fingertips met and released. There will never be another."

~oOo~

Commander Thomas Lasky tugged impatiently on the hem of his uniform jacket and forced himself to a dignified walk. He was, after all, the new executive officer of the \_UNSC Infinity\_ and running down corridors was undignified. The heart of the buttoned-up young man inside the officer's uniform beat with a rhythm that sent him hurrying toward the cargo bay with boyish anticipation.

The launch bay doors opened just as he entered the upper-level viewing area. He knew from this morning's briefing to expect twelve pelicans to arrive this morning. Their cargo top secret and the mission orders still sealed, but Thomas Lasky knew at least one of the passengers, and this is what had a white-knuckled grip on the railing. Of course, he reminded himself and swallowed hard, she'll be different, and not quite the girl he remembered. It will still be essentially her, and his excitement at seeing her again grew as he counted the ships landing gracefully on their assigned spots.

Twelve Pelicans powered down.

The doors rumbled closed and green lights illuminated the Bay as it pressurized. While deck crews ran out to refuel and run systems checks, twelve ramps dropped simultaneously echoing around the cavernous cargo bay.

The synchronized sound of heavy booted feet walking in formation down metal ramps to the deck throbbed in time with his breath.

A voice shouted above the din.

"Spartans! Form up!"

\_It's her!\_

Lasky pressed his palms against the glass wall, willing her to look up. He watched her observing the Spartans as they moved into formation, and he grinned. Straight and tall, even more beautiful than he remembered, she suddenly turned and looked up. It took only a moment for her to locate him. Her entire face lit up with a smile that nearly staggered him. Then as suddenly as it began, her face shuttered and turned back to her charges.

Someone joined him on the platform; he didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Is she here?" Asked April Orenski with more animation than she would ever allow herself in front of her Marines.

"Right down there," Lasky pointed at the women in the Scout Variant

Mjolnir armor with the short auburn hair pulled back with a band.

"Ha! She always swore she'd never cut her hair."

"I knowâ€¦ I rememberâ€¦"

"Tom, don't get your hopes up. She's a Spartan now. They'll have changed her."

The XO shook his head, "At least she's here now, and there'll be time to get to know each other again."

"She's a foot taller than you now and weighs about as much as you and I put together."

"I don't care. She's still Sarah."

April Orenski watched her friend with affection. Then he glanced at her, "How are you doing, April? Settling in?"

What he meant was had she come to terms with losing her arm and the ability to work as a field Marine. The cybernetic arm they'd given her to replace her left arm worked every bit as well as the real thing. It's just that unless she made the choice to become a Spartan, Marine regs said she couldn't fight anymore. So here she was the Commander of the Marine contingent of the Infinity. She should be satisfied and she was, if a bit restless

Her actions that day earned her a Silver Star and the rank of Major. After the light saber had severed her arm, her men kept her alive until help arrived. She remembered staring up into the darkness and thinking she must be losing consciousness when lights began falling from the sky. Then all around them Spartans began to drop to the earth and roll to a stop. One of them picked her up in his arms and carried her to a makeshift shelter, the other Spartans quickly erected.

The gold faceplate identified its wearer and she whispered, "John?" Before he shushed her with a touch of his fingers to her lips. Something like icy fire coursed through her veins and before she lost consciousness she managed to swipe two fingers across his face plate.

He caught her hand and held it for a moment, "Relax, Captain. We'll be out of here within the hour."

And true to his word she awoke, warm and dry, in a ship's med bay.

Lasky shook her shoulder and pulled her thoughts away from that day. "Let's go down and say hello."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Tom. This is her first command, she won't appreciate the interruption."

"I guess you're right. I have to get back to the bridge anyway."

"She's not going anywhere, Commander."



Lasky grinned, "You're right. Oh, the Skipper wants a meeting tomorrow at 0600 to discuss training possibilities with the Spartans. See you then."

~oOo~

Resisting the urge to tug at the collar of his dress uniform, Commander Michael Sullivan stood at the position of attention while his orders were read aloud by the Admiral.

"Commander Michael Sullivan, you are hereby ordered by UNSC Medical Command to report to the Pillar of Autumn as Assistant Chief Medical Officer. Report no later than 1 Jan and you are granted three weeks of personal leave. Signed, Vice Admiral Leonard H. McCoy, Chief UNSC Medical Command."

The Admiral closed the orders and faced Commander Sullivan, "on a personal note, all of us want to know how much you'll be missed here. Your skills proved invaluable on many occasions. Very best of luck to you." The Admiral shook his hand. "Fair winds and following seas, Commander."

The young man saluted the Admiral, executed an about face and didn't stop walking until he reached his quarters and shut the door behind him. Shrugging off his dress uniform blouse, he poured himself a Scotch and thought about his friends, both absent and alive. He made a silent toast and wished them well.

## 19. Long Hard Times to Come Chapter 19

TITLE: Long Hard Times to Come

### CHAPTER 19

AN: Thank you so much to all the readers who've stayed with the story. Again, I'm using certain facts and changing a few to suit my purposes. To describe the '\_Autumn's\_ 50mm defense turrets I used a term I heard on the TV show The Last Ship (LOVE that show).

I upgraded to Windows 10, am I the only one who finds Microsoft's bastardization of the terms Spartan and Cortana disrespectful? In fact, it's a disgrace to her memory. I know, I know, they own it. The greedy bastards.

\* \* \*

><p>"I drew this gallant head of war,<p>

And cull'd these fiery spirits from the world,

To outlook conquest and to win renown

Even in the jaws of danger and of death."

â€"Shakespeare, \_King John\_. Act V, scene 2, line 113

\* \* \*

><p>"General Quarters<em>. G<em>eneral Quarters. All hands man your battle stations. General Quarters. General Quarters. All hands man your battle stations."

She listened with satisfaction to the sound of her voice announcing General Quarters and the claxon ringing over the ship's comms and echoing down the gangways. The ever vigilant the crew of the \_Pillar of Autumn\_ sprang into action at the summons. If they thought it odd to hear a female voice they didn't question it. General quarters meant their lives and their ship were about to face danger and no one questioned the need for battle readiness. When the ship was ready, she altered their course and gave orders to bring the six twin 50mm point defense gun turrets to bear and the six Archer missile pods online.

The durable UNSC Halcyon-class light cruiser, nicknamed '\_Autumn\_' responded obediently to her commands and made a graceful arcing turn to come about and face the adversary threatening her crew. A threat she would not allow to continue. They were here on business and she wouldn't allow anything to jeopardize the mission. The twin 50-mikes quickly spun into to position aimed down the nose of the Covenant Cruiser.

Rather oddly named for a word that meant golden, idyllic and peaceful, the cruiser was anything but. She was a fighter, a down in the weeds scrapper and fearless when cornered. Hanging in space framed in the light of The Soell System she seemed to lean forward, ready to strike like the mythical sea bird Halcyon.

Once in position no one spoke while they waited for their next order. This was an old foe, and both the '\_Autumn\_' and her crew were well acquainted with their treachery. She'd already planned her next step, but to order it would prove disrespectful to Captain Keyes, so she waited calmly while planning alternate mission scenarios. Just in case. She hugged herself, this was thrilling and more fun than she ever expected.

**\*\*Two hours ago\*\***

The general mission briefing ended an hour ago, and the crew released to begin preparations. Inside the Captain's day cabin, a handful of elite soldiers, silent and hidden inside their armor, stood at attention listening to a briefing concerning their role in the coming mission. These men were specialists in all forms of combat. Trained from a young age to kill, control and capture. Their courage and strength mark them as elite and their status nearly mythical. They are Spartans.

Holding himself rigid at the position of attention, one of that handful of soldiers, a Spartan II, call sign Sierra-117 experienced difficulty with the concept of UNSC's current mission objective and possible outcome scenarios. Although the Spartan respected Captain Keyes, risking the ship in this manner, was a waste of material and resources. He would never show it, of course, but as he watched the Captain's impatient pacing, he thought the CO might agree.

Many of the Spartans he'd grown up with were sacrificed to this war. He took their deaths personally, but instead of allowing the grief to overwhelm him, he forced himself to grow stronger and resilient to honor their sacrifices. The years of this war changed him until he no

longer knew the difference between the man and the armor, the soldier or the human. He'd learned to fight alone and rely only on himself. It's what kept him alive. Although he would admit it to no one, he sometimes imagined his Spartan brothers and sisters were with him. And it was their spirits that kept him safe and alive.

The secret list of dead Spartans, coupled with the usual lie that Spartans never died felt stale and old to him now. Sierra-117 knew exactly how many of his siblings were gone, not MIA, but gone. Dead and gone. Forever.

Kelly-087 was the exception. Officially declared MIA, he could not find it within himself to acknowledge that she might be dead. If she'd been killed, he would know. Somehow, he would know. The others? Sarah, Tom, Michael, and April. He closed his eyes for a moment. He didn't know about them. Out in the field for so long he'd lost track of them. So many years had passed since that day at Corbulo Academy. The Spartan promised himself to inquire about their status.

He'd heard about the new Spartans and speculated on their training and indoctrination. Although he hadn't met one, he'd heard stories of their exploits. Especially Noble Team, whose story everyone knew. They'd bravely fought a campaign that eventually spread across the entire planet of Reach. Successfully destroying Covenant installations and enemy soldiers as they went. Until, one by one, they sacrificed themselves for the sake of the mission. Reach fell, but their sacrifices would never be forgotten. Only Jun-A226 survived and eventually made his way aboard the '\_Autumn\_'. The Spartan also knew about the A.I. artifact Jun-A226 brought aboard. In fact, the CO had just turned the briefing over to this so-called A.I. At last, Sierra-117's curiosity was about to be appeased.

"Cortana," Captain Keyes interrupted the feminine voice, "Please activate your avatar. It's off-putting listening to a disembodied voice." The Spartan noted the smile twitching his lips.

The Spartans glanced at each other. Disembodied? It was just a computer voice, right? A shimmer of blue turned their attention back to Captain Keyes and the sudden appearance of a female shaped avatar. Approximately two feet tall, the naked female stood on a pedestal and turned an annoyed glance at the CO.

"If I may continue, sir?"

The Captain nodded, and she went on, "Spartans," she nodded with a respectful greeting. "Under my direction we are on course for the Soell System, where Spartans will conduct a recon mission to ascertain the whereabouts of certain Covenant leadership. If found, your orders state they are to be taken into custody and brought to the \_Pillar of Autumn\_ as prisoners of war.

"With all due respect," Sierra-117 inclined his head at the Captain, as if asking for permission. He didn't wait for an answer. "Under your direction? An A.I.?"

Unaccustomed to questioning, Cortana blinked and folded her arms across her chest. Spartans were out in the field for long periods, so it was no wonder they didn't understand. She addressed herself to the Spartan, who asked the question.

"John, isn't it? May I call you John?" She said politely gazing into his visor.

The room was silent.

"You may not." He felt the other Spartans next to him shift their feet. Inside his helmet, a series of red lights illuminated his HUD. "My rank is Master Chief."

"Very well, \_Master Chief\_."

Whether he was aware of it or not the Spartan broke formation and took a step toward her.

"The answer to your question is simple. As a Cortana line A.I. I'm fully capable of navigating a ship of this size, even down to firing her guns. Shall I recite the contents of her armory for you, Master Chief? Dimensions of the vessel, crew compliment?"

"Wait. Cortana line? You mean there are more of her?" The Spartan next to him blurted. Sierra-117 chose to ignore the outburst and addressed the A.I. again.

"Unnecessary. Such information is easily obtained from any computer on this ship." Why the sudden dislike of her? She was simply a piece of technology, a tool, nothing more. A computer simulation in human form meant to integrate and interact easily with the crew. Her high-handed behavior made him uneasy and why did she seem so familiar?

The avatar crossed her arms pushing the ample flesh of her breasts together and arched an eyebrow his direction.

"And now you compare me to ship's computers?"

Well, a naked and insolent A.I. avatar was certainly something you didn't see every day. Red lights flickered inside his helmet again, while he thought about her response. If he knew what a petulant child looked like he would define her behavior as such. Years ago, in the early days of their training, one of the kids played what he called an April Fool's joke on him. Perhaps this was

"Master Chief, I am prepared to continue the briefing if you're prepared to listen. And in case you need reminding, you and your Spartan siblings are the protectors of Earth and all her colonies."

"My team is always prepared," he shot back. "You may proceed. Quoting Doctor Halsey is disrespectful and manipulative." Green lights flashed inside his helmet and this time he answered with his a light of his own.

"Disrespectful? Hardly." Cortana's brows knit together. "I am

"That's quite enough, Cortana." Captain Keyes cautioned his voice low and slightly threatening.

"Very well, sir." She glared at the Spartans and continued. "In two hours we'll break Slipspace and enter the Soell System. Intelligence

informs us a small group of Covenant leadership convened on Installation 04. Your orders are to capture the Covent leaders. Bring them aboard, by whatever means necessary for interrogation. This mission has the highest priority, Spartans." She glanced at Captain Keyes. "Even the ship is expendable."

And that's exactly the point where Master Chief disagreed with the scenario.

"Captain?"

"No questions, Master Chief. Not this time. Take your men down to the armory where there's a surprise waiting for you. Compliments of Doctor Halsey." Captain Keyes nodded them out and disappeared into the CIC.

The Master Chief knew it was an act of dismissal and a warning about further inquiries. Very well, the Spartan signaled to his men, and they quickly exited. But the curious Spartan couldn't resist a final glance, only to discover, with her hands clasped demurely over her full hips, Cortana smiling at him.

Indigo blue eyes pinned him where he stood. Why did she seem so familiar? He thought of Sarah, Kelly and April and dismissed them as possible answers. Drawn inexplicably to this A.I., suddenly he realized the familiar pangs of regret reminded him of emotions he'd long ago learned to sublimate. The weight of Sarah Palmer in his arms and the taste of her lips when he kissed her. The solid strength of Kelly's body pressed to his and her cry of release when her body convulsed around his. They'd both smiled at him the same way this A.I. smiled at him now. An expression of certainty, of knowing and it made him feelâ€¦ The Spartan spun his large frame toward the hatch and removed himself from the distraction from the room.

**\*\*Present\*\***

With his mind focused solely on the mission, Master Chief followed his team off the ramp. High above them the '\_Autumn\_' fought her own battle with the Covenant cruiser. Although they may have desired to stay with the ship, they turned as one to watch the Pelican lift off, effectively stranding them.

The Master Chief allowed his team a few moments to stretching their arms and legs to acclimate themselves to the new armor. '\_Mjolnir\_' the engineers called it. Master Chief knew his history, the germanic word translated into the Hammer of Thor.

The dull ache of his new implant still resonated in his skull. They'd called it a neural implant, but had not explained its purpose. Perhaps it had something to do with the new armor, but it had not gone unnoticed that he was the only one to receive such an implant.

The Master Chief signaled his team to move out.

## CHAPTER: 20

This is dedicated to Spartan10007 who asked me to write him this story. Thank you for your encouragement and feedback. He writes, too. Go check out his stuff.

AN: Also thank you to those of you who stuck with me and kept reading. I know I drove many of you crazy with my less than canon approach to the characters. I always meant to have this finished by today when Halo 5 released. Then I almost missed my own deadline! See you online, soon. And as my friend said last night, \_screw Osiris let's go find Cortana\_. Mount up, Spartans it's time to get back to work.

\* \* \*

><p>"Come then, Warrior. Have your resolution."  
â€"Shadow-of-Sundered-Star, (Ur-Didact)<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Silence.<p>

The void binds him helplessly in a grip of icy silence. The darkness shields him from life. The debris from the Ur-Didact's ship, \_Mantle's Approach\_ float alongside his wounded body mocking him with its freedom. Perhaps the Ur-Didact he will get his revenge after all. But it isn't the vacuum of space that will kill the Spartan or the injuries he sustained fighting the Ur-Didact. It's the silence.

The silence is killing him and there is no escape. The quicksilver presence of her in his mind is gone. As hard as he tries to reach out to her, he cannot find her, touch her or hear her voice. He's alone for the first time in years. But she will come back to him. Just a little while longer and she'll speak, chiding him for worrying about her. Teasing him because he's floating out here in space when he should signal the ship to pick him up. He will be patient and he \_knows\_ how to be patient. A little patience and the sound of her voice will fill him again.

The alternative is a grief that knows no end.

They always figured things out together. He did his part. Hadn't she assured him of that? \_You did it. Just like you always do. \_ If he stares hard enough into the debris he might catch a glimpse of her. She will pull herself together... somehow and return to him. Then he will insert her chip and all will be as it should. Until then, pain consumes him. Searing the empty places in his mind, where she once lived. No matter how hard he tries, all he hears is the thumping sound of his heart pumping blood stubbornly through his veins.

"Not without you, Cortana. My muse, my confidant, my friend. I am nothing without you." The words he whispers, rise up through a clot of emotions, which threaten to choke him. Why hadn't he said those words to her, before? Before she walked away, before she sacrificed herself. Before. Before. The unwelcoming dark of space offers him no solace. Perhaps if he unseals his helmet?

What existed in those places before? Before rescuing her from the

Pillar of Autumn, before she stopped him from activating the Halo on Installation 04. The impact of the events of that day will never leave him. He remembers every detail.

Watching the Pelican disappear into the low hanging clouds. The team watching the aircraft depart and he allowed them a second longer than was necessary to watch, then indicated on their HUDs to move out. They don't look back. The only way is forward. They all know that.

He would never give voice to the danger clawing at him that day in the thick in the stale air. It's the weight on his shoulders, the stabbing pains in his knees. A feeling that taunts just at the fringe of his thoughts so he's never quite able to grasp it. There's a finish line waiting for him. Perhaps it's as simple as his death or new beginning. It's so palpable the Master Chief dragged in a breath, thankful for the armor's superior filtering systems and forced his feet to move. It's like walking through water.

The other men with him are relatively the same age, and he is their leader. A role that denies him a moment of relaxation or reflection. They weren't trained for that, and this is not something he could discuss with them. Not something on which they might compare notes. There are no words in his experience or vocabulary for exhaustion.

A red light flashed on his HUD and Master Chief directed his gaze where the other Spartan points. They gather round, while two of them stand guard. There on the rocky ground wedged between the remains of a wrecked Ghost and a shapeless grey substance is an Elite. A very dead Elite. Obscured by the substance his red armor is nearly unrecognizable.

Master Chief pushed some of the substance aside to retrieve the energy sword still in the Sanghelios' belt. The elegant weapon responds to his touch with a flash and hum of plasma. His action caused the Elite to roll off the rocks and over onto its back. And now they see the clotted purple blood spilled from the thing's throat. Its combat knife still clutched in his hand.

"Can't say I blame the bastard. If that's Flood Master Chief, we've got a bigger problem than picking up few Covie bosses."

They all know what they're looking at and it places an entirely different light on the mission. This isn't the first time they've fought the Flood, and they know how to kill it. But they can't shoot the monster without injuring or killing the Spartan. They don't quite trust their new armor, so they wait for a moment longer than necessary.

The bark of an assault weapon and a shout, turn them toward one of the team. One of the Flood captured a Spartan and slowly pulls the man down to his knees while it crawls up his legs.

Master Chief drew the energy sword and charging toward the downed Spartan slashing through layers of the viscous flesh. It quivers as if it's in pain until the thing finally slips from the Spartan's legs and lays pulsing horribly like a huge heart until finally it's still. The Master Chief emptied his magnum into the creature, while another Spartan helped his teammate to his feet. The Spartan cannot hide the rapid heart rate and erratic breathing. He's shaken. Master Chief

reloads the Spartan's assault rifle for him and hands it back to him. No one thinks to tease him about his reaction.

Another klick, and their objective is nothing but a gray, oblong shape that no longer resembles a building. Shattered or torn off their frames, the windows and doors are gone. The wind howls through the broken windows and funnels the debris. The stench of death, a smell their armor filters cannot diminish, is thick in the filthy air. The Spartans move with determination toward the broken doors.

As soon as they enter the building one of the Spartans reports. "Master Chief, movement."

He nods slightly when his HUD lights up green and they acknowledge they've seen it too. They retrieve a couple of weapons each only to toss them down when they discover the clips are empty. Reverently moving over the increasing number of Covenant bodies and discarded weapons slows their pace. Hope of finding life fading with every step.

The frantic calls from the ship began at the moment the gray creatures begin rising from the dead bodies. Covenant ships are attacking the '\_Autumn\_'. They are being fired upon and there's nowhere to run. The Captain shouts into the radio, for the to return to the \_Pillar of Autumn\_. A Pelican is inbound eta, thirty minutes. The first Pelican unknowingly carried Flood back to the ship and they're spreading. His crew is dying. Over the sound of the radio the Spartans hear the screaming.

The Spartans board the Pelican. The pilot is so rattled it's the Master Chief who flies the ship to the '\_Autumn\_'. They prepare to meet their old enemy.

"Take her," he said. Take her and keep her safe." That was his last conversation with Captain Keyes. A man he admired and respected. All gone. The '\_Autumn\_' and her crew, his Spartan team. Until only he and Cortana remained.

And although there'd been many other battles, near misses and moments with her, that moment is when it began. Although he resented the intrusion of her presence. He felt her huddled against him, grieving for the people she'd lost and the ship that had been her responsibility. He didn't understand how it was possible, but he kept her safe within his armor. As time passed and he realized he loved this entity named Cortana, just as he had loved Kelly. Unlike the two human women, Kelly and Sarah, Cortana became integral to his every breath, decision and choice.

He couldn't touch her as he had Sarah and Kelly. That didn't seem to matter. With Cortana, there was no hesitation and no sense that he was doing something wrong or outside of his training. Cortana was his responsibility and he kept her safe. In return, she watched over him while he slept in Cryo, monitored his health, whispered encouragement when he faltered and teased him. \_Come on, Chief. Take a girl for a ride. \_

\_Wake up Chief. I need you. \_He will never hear her voice again.

The lights from a ship illuminate him in the darkness. Over his



helmet speaker he hears, "Infinity Actual? Pelican Nine Sixer. We found him."

He's on Infinity, now. Each step takes him further from Cortana. It's only duty and training that keep him on his feet now. How will she find him if he's here on this ship? Marines flank the Pelican and salute as he passes. This is unnecessary. I have work to do. I must be with Cortana, she's waiting for me.

At the end of the long formation of Marines, he sees two familiar faces. Captain Thomas Lasky and Commander Sarah Palmer wait for him. No, I cannot do this, he thinks and turns away from the first and third highest ranking officers on this ship. He walks until he locates a dark corridor and a view screen. Earth beckons below him, hanging in the void of space. She's out there. She needs him. It was his job to protect her.

Captain Lasky approaches him quietly, allowing the Spartan a wide berth. He hears what the Skipper says, but there are no words he can use to describe how lost he feels. Finally, the captain leaves him alone. Eventually he makes his way to the armory, where they remove his armor and escort him to the Infirmary. Two hours later, showered and in a utility uniform, a sailor escorts the silent man to the bridge.

Commander Palmer meets him halfway and takes his hand. There are too many people on the bridge and he wonders why. "Master Chief, do you remember Cadet Palmer. I tossed you that grenade you used to kill that Hunter. You save my life that night at Corbulo."

Master Chief cocks his head at her. Not remember her? Of course, he remembers her. He closes his hand around hers. She is no longer the diminutive cadet or ODST, she's a woman and a Spartan.

"You've done well, Commander Palmer." He means it and there's more he wants to say because that isn't enough. She seems to understand when she catches his eyes and mouths, we'll talk later. Then Captain Lasky takes his hand and pulls him away from Sarah.

"And mine." Captain Lasky says with a friendly smile and a shake of the Spartan's hand.

"Thisâ€¦ this isn't necessary. I remember you. I remember everything. Stop."

"You don't understand, Master Chief." Sarah said gently. "This ship and crew? We are the generation who followed you into space. We are the children who decided to become Spartans, marines and sailors."

"Permission to leave the bridge, Captain?" He must get away from these people. He knew them once. Once, long ago. Thirty years?

"No John, you will stay here with us. You are not alone. We are with you." Captain Lasky stepped in front of him. "We are the kids who watched the vids of you recovering that Pelican on the Pillar of Autumn and a hundred other moments just like that one. We went to flight school because of you."

The Spartan sees a pair of shoes and looks up from the deck. An

officer with a boyish face is smiling at him. The medical insignia on his shoulder identifies him as a doctor.

"Commander Sullivan, sir. Chief medical officer of the Infinity. Thank you for saving us that night. I watched you save lives carrying people away from a crash when you could have saved yourself. I followed your career. Your actions inspired me to go into medicine."

It's good to see you again Master Chief." Major April Orenski folded her strong capable fingers around his hand. "We grieved with you when you lost your Spartan brothers and sisters, Master Chief. You saved my life and your courage inspired me to become a Marine. Thank you for teaching me the way of a warrior."

Commander Palmer linked her arm through his. "Those Marines who met your ship. That wasn't planned, John. They intended to demonstrate their respect for you. You've done so muchâ€¦ lost so much. They wanted to acknowledge you and honor your sacrifices."

"A skipper is only as good as his crew, Master Chief. I need you here. We need you here. Teach us and share your experiences."

"We're all here, Captain Lasky, Major Orenski, Commander Sullivan and I. Come with back to the stars with us, John."

All he can do is nod at this display of affection and respect. When they finally release him, another sailor shows him to his quarters. All around him, Spartan IVs laugh and move quickly through the corridors of what he understands is Spartan Town. How different they seem from the Spartans he grew up with. Everything changed in the last four and half years and now he's alone in this strange new world.

The silence is killing him, robbing him of his will to keep breathing. Those kids... those officers on the bridge... the ones he, Kelly, and Fred saved that night grew into successful and fearless adults. They thanked him. They claimed he inspired them. He is nothing.

The door to his new quarters opens and he steps inside quickly. The air is stale with disuse. Yet, there's a familiar scent in the air. The narrow bed is made up with fresh sheets. There's a coffee machine, a small closet, a pile of new uniforms sit on a desk chair and there's an empty bookcase. Sharp eyes scan the room and stop when he notices a woman standing silently the corner of the room. With her dark hair curling over her shoulders, her pale skin darkening with a blush and blue-green eyes crinkled at the corners this woman watched him enter.

The door slides shut behind him.

She's in his arms before he can say her name. After he catches her, wrapping his arms around her strong frame, he notices the heavy pulse of her heart pounding against his chest. His own heart matches the staccato beat as she breathes against his neck. With a grin, she grabs his face with her hands. Suddenly shy, only touches her lips to his.

He remembers everything. The silk of her hair against his skin, the

taste of her mouth as they press their lips together and the perfect way she fits against him. Emotions rip through him, relief, great sadness and grief battle in his mind. Kelly holds him close crushing him with her Spartan strength and willing him to live.

"Kelly." He rubs his thumb over her lower lip and whispers her name. Then Spartan John-117 allows himself to give in to her effort at comforting him and decides to live.

~o0o~o0o~

The End

End  
file.